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[PRICE ONE PENNY.]



CORA STARTED AT THE PAIN IN LEONARD'S RICH TONES, AND DREW BACK INTO THE SHADOW OF THE BALCONY.

A FOOLISH PREJUDICE.

[A NOVELETTE.]

CHAPTER I.

THE sun was just rising, casting a flood of rosy light over the flat roof and square-paned windows of Thanet House.

It was buried amidst tall firs, chestnuts, and giant, wide-spreading oaks, deep down in a natural hollow, and the sound of busy life beyond the hill which towered above was borne to its inmates in a dreamy hum, mellowed by distance.

A tall, slight girl with heavy brown curls tied with narrow black ribbon was standing on the lawn, a look of eager expectation on her fair, oval face. Presently the sharp crushing of footsteps on the gravel path fell upon her ear, and a bright flush stained even the snowy brow.

She moved quickly forward, the long train of her soft black robe making no sound on the damp grass, and in another moment her white hands were clasped in two strong brown ones, and two

dark eyes were gazing into hers—blue as the sky above their heads.

"Uncle is asleep, and I crept down like a mouse for fear of waking him," said the girl, in a hushed voice, as though she was afraid she would be heard even at that distance from the large, brown-brick building.

"Yes, I know; fast asleep as a house. I woke auntie as I passed, and she has promised to be in the garden when we come back. But where is your hat, Cora?"

"Oh! that is all right. I put it in the summer-house with my shawl last night. Come with me to fetch them, you lazy boy," for the young fellow had thrown himself on a garden-seat, but he rose instantly at her words, and they walked side by side down the quaint old pathway where tall lilies nodded in the cool, fresh air, and the sweet fragrance of summer flowers fanned their cheeks.

They stood still for a few moments at the entrance to the summer-house, while Leonard Denbigh plucked a bunch of the star-like jasmine that hung in graceful festoons over the delicate woodwork; then Cora disappeared for a moment, returning with a soft cashmere shawl over her

shapely shoulders and a coquettish little hat adorned with several fluffy black feathers on her head.

"Now, Cora, for a good brisk walk across the fields," and taking her hand he placed it on his arm, and opening a tiny gate in the wall they passed out into a broad avenue of red and white chestnuts.

The ground was strewn with the rich bloom now, for the small pale husks of the nuts were already formed on their high branches.

"This will be our last morning walk together," said Cora.

They had left the avenue far behind, and were walking slowly across some fields where the tall grass waved and rippled in the morning breeze, and the odour of wild roses filled the air.

"Pick me a bunch of those roses, Len! Perhaps they will serve as a keepsake, who knows!"

"Why should this be our last walk together?" asked Leonard, as he mounted a rustic stile and commenced plucking the pale blossoms from their prickly stems.

"Because Agnes will be here to-day, and I should not like to run any risks. Besides, she is

to sleep in my room, so you see it will be impossible."

Cora took the bunch of roses he held out and turned her head so that he might not see her face. How silly he would think her if he were to see those tears.

"Darling," whispered her cousin, jumping from the stile and putting his arm round the slim waist. "Darling, I shall hate this Agnes Lester if she is going to interfere with us. Why could she not have a room of her own?" and a dark frown disfigured his handsome face as he continued, kicking some stones from the pathway into the deep ditch that ran along the hedge, "I believe it is done on purpose. What say you, Cora, mine?"

"I think, Leonard, that we are both very stupid. We see each other every day and ought to be satisfied. And, Len, you must not talk of hating Agnes—poor Agnes. She has no one in the whole world to care for her now that Aunt Muriel is dead, but ourselves, and I mean to do all I can to make her happy."

Leonard did not make any reply, and they silently turned in the direction of home. As they reached the brow of the hill the clock in the parish church chimed the hour of eight, and she too quickened their pace.

A slight, small old lady was walking slowly down the well-kept pathway gathering flowers, which she placed in a fancy basket she held in her hand, when the cousins entered the great wooden gate. She raised her head as their footsteps sounded on the crisp gravel and looked with a smile at their bright, happy young faces.

"What a pity it is that Tom will not allow them to be engaged. I cannot understand that absurd prejudice against cousins marrying," she murmured to herself.

Tom was her brother and Cora's uncle. Cora's father and mother were drowned on their way to England after years spent in South Africa, and Thomas Denbigh had taken the little waif and brought her up with his only child—a son.

He never thought that in the days to come these two might grow to love each other with a deeper, if not purer, love than that a brother feels for a sister; and when this did come to pass he stormed and raved, and finally threatened, in private to his sister—his wife had been dead some years—that he would turn the ungrateful little mixt out of doors; but by dint of gentle persuasion Tom Denbigh cooled down, and the house settled back into its old calm.

On the morrow morning, when they were to drive over to the station for Agnes, Leonard took the opportunity to call Cora aside when they were alone.

"What is it Len?" said Cora.

"Cora," he whispered, taking the girl's supple form in his arms, and holding her to him passionately, while he pressed quick, warm kisses on the fair face.

"Cora, you will not let this girl come between us? We have been all in all to each other ever since I can remember. Spare me a little of your time still. I know that we must be careful, or my father will go off into one of his fits of temper, and for your sake I bear with this secrecy."

His cousin gazed at him with surprised agitation. She could not understand this sudden outburst of passion. Why should Agnes Lester make her forget him?

"You know, Leonard, that my love is given to you for all time, therefore why ask this question? You are unkind and unreasonable!"

There were tears in the deep blue eyes, and the sweet mouth quivered. How could he be so cruel as to even hint at such a thing as their parting?

"My darling, I know I am," he replied, still holding her in that close embrace; and she trembled beneath the gaze of his dark eyes. "But, dear, if you knew the strange forboding that fills my soul, you would not be so hurt. I feel as though it would have been better for you if we had never met."

"Leonard!" she breathed, in a low, hushed tone, the pink colour fading from her cheeks.

"I did not mean it, dear—oh, forgive me! I must be going mad to speak so wildly," cried Leonard, gathering the trembling figure closer to

his heart, and kissing the sweet, pale face till the deep colour dyed cheek and brow.

"Really, Len, I must go up and put my hat and jacket on. We shall be too late," said Cora, some few minutes later. "And, mind, no more nonsense."

She ran out of the room with a bright smile on her face, and a happy light dancing in her large blue eyes, humming as she went the first few bars of the pretty Scotch ballad, "Dinna Forget."

Judith Denbigh and her niece appeared in about a quarter-of-an-hour, ready dressed for their drive.

The station was some five miles distant, and the carriage did not take long to do the journey; and Cora was walking up and down the wooden platform, her blue eyes shining with expectation and a flush on her fair cheeks.

CHAPTER II.

LEONARD had gone to the ticket-office to inquire how long the train would be; and Aunt Judith was admiring the flowers that grew on the high banks on either side.

Great red and white roses were just opening, and the humbler summer flowers were filling the cool air with their fragrance.

The train was punctual enough, and soon rumbled slowly into the station; a cloud of white steam completely hiding, for a second, the passengers as they alighted.

Cora stared eagerly at the carriage doors, as they opened and the people descended one after the other. By this time the platform was crowded—for though the station was contrived, the town was rather an important one, and there was a great deal of traffic to-and-fro—but no young girl who could possibly be her cousin had appeared yet; and Cora began to fear that Agnes had missed the train.

"That must be she!" cried Judith Denbigh, suddenly pointing with her parasol to the far end of the platform.

Cora and Leonard turned with one accord, and saw coming towards them, with slow, stately grace, a tall, fair girl, with a wealth of deep gold hair, and a complexion that the searching glare of the noonday sun could find no flaw in.

As she moved along with that easy, languid tread, the soft, black travelling-robe revealed every line of the splendidly-proportioned figure; and a swift, sharp pang shot through Cora's heart, as she saw the look of startled admiration in Leonard's dark eyes when this vision of perfect beauty stood before him, but she quickly repressed the feeling.

"How could he help admiring Agnes Lester?" she asked herself, for she had never seen so lovely a face before.

"You are my Aunt Judith, I know," said the girl, in a low, thrilling voice, lifting her snowy lids with their thick fringes of gold, and holding out a small, black-gloved hand.

Judith took the slim fingers in his own warm clasp; but a strange mingling assailed her loving heart as she caught the glance those pale blue eyes darted under their long lashes, at her nephew Leonard.

"She is very like her father in expression," she thought. "I hope and trust, for dear Cora's sake, that she is not like him in disposition," and she sighed, for she felt that the dear old days of quiet, peaceful happiness had come to an end with the advent of this beautiful creature, around whom an atmosphere of fashion seemed to hover.

"I know you in a moment, Agnes," she said aloud, kissing the soft-skinned cheek.

"You are like your father; but you have your mother's complexion." She spoke pleasantly; she would try to love the orphan daughter of her only sister.

The roseleaf colour deepened on the rounded cheek, as Agnes kissed the pure, calm face of her cousin Cora, and then turned to Leonard, a bewildering smile parting the thin, scarlet lips. The girl's soulless heart craved for and lived upon adulation and flattery, and Judith Denbigh, though she knew it not, had completely won her niece's heart by those simple words of praise.

"Now, auntie, you three had better go over to the hotel while I see to Agnes's luggage," said Leonard. "I shall not be more than a few minutes."

Agnes looked after his strong, stalwart figure, as he strode in the direction of the cloak-room, and Miss Denbigh sighed again, for she had lived long enough in the world to read aright the smile that lurked at the corner of the girl's red mouth.

"She is a flirt!" she thought.

"Come, Agnes," and Cora slipped her hand through the other's arm, and led her across the broad, quiet road, with its grim, old-fashioned houses standing back from the highway, half hidden by thick, wide-spreading trees, that were now in their fullest leaf.

The hotel, a great stone building, with three rows of glistening windows draped in the snowiest of muslin and palest of pink, faced the railway station.

A broad flight of steps led up to the immense hall, where several gentlemen were smoking, lazily watching the people streaming out of the station as train after train came in.

They turned and stared with well admiration at the two girls as they entered the large, cool hall—one tall, slight, and spiritually lovely, the other tall and fair, with a beauty that men rave about.

After luncheon they drove back.

Cora never forgot that drive home through the long narrow lanes, bordered by high, green hedges, where the birds were hopping in and out and carolling gaily; then along broad country roads, where green fields and patches of wooded land stretched far, far away. Presently they came to a road across which the long branches of the high trees met in a pale emerald arch, and every now and again, as the landau rolled swiftly on, little brown squirrels ran across this natural archway, and gazed curiously down at the intruders. It was all new to Agnes—the fresh country scene and the soft chirruping of the birds above their heads—and she kept Leonard employed in answering all her questions.

"We have not far to go now, dear Agnes," said Cora, bending forward and laying her black-gloved hand on her cousin's slim wrist; "and I am sure you will need a rest before dinner."

"Oh, I am not tired in the least degree," responded Agnes, languidly, lifting her white lids and flashing a sweet look at her cousin's fair face.

"I am accustomed to travelling. You see, poor dear mamma was never able to stay in one place for any length of time during the last two or three years, and Grandma Gordon's legacy just enabled her to have the change so much required."

The soft, seductive tones had grown so low and tremulous that it was only by bending over her that they heard her words, and Leonard turned his dark head away and gazed down the avenue through which they were now driving, a mist of unspoken sympathy dimming her eyes. Poor Agnes! her life had indeed been a sad, and, to a certain extent, lonely one.

"Here we are," cried Judith Denbigh, as the carriage drew up before the brown wooden gates of Thanet House.

Leonard sprang down on to the path and helped the two cousins and his aunt to alight, and then opened the gate for them to enter.

Mr. Thomas Denbigh was standing in the long, somewhat dark, dining-room reading the paper when the sound of wheels disturbed him, and a flush of pleased expectation rose to his rugged face.

"Ah! so they have arrived," he muttered, going to the window and drawing the heavy red curtains aside with a hand that trembled slightly—for, spite his hardness, he had loved his dead sister, and the thought of seeing her child stirred a chord in his heart he had deemed long since snapped.

The sight that met his eyes was one well calculated to inspire a feeling of pleasure, but Tom Denbigh drew back with a hasty exclamation,

and a dark cloud of disappointment overspread his stern features.

Agnes Lester was walking by Leonard's side, her fair, haughty head turned towards him, a smile of intense interest lighting the pale blue eyes and playing over the perfect features; but the gentle swaying of the tall, voluptuous form as she advanced along the soft, yielding grass somehow reminded him of the sinuous movement of a snake.

His new piece was so different to what he had pictured her. It would be simply impossible to get this splendid woman.

These thoughts chased each other through his mind as he hastened to the hall door, and throwing it open went out into the jasmine-covered porch to meet them.

"Hullo, pater!" exclaimed Leonard, with a smile. "Here is our fair cousin."

"Welcome to Thanet House," said his father, drawing Agnes to him, and pressing a kiss on her gleaming cheek. "You are like—"

He checked himself abruptly; not even now, though the grass was green on his grave, could he bring himself to mention the name of the man who had ruined his sister's life.

The girl made no answer, but she took his two hands in hers and pressed them; then Miss Denbigh carried her off to her room, followed by Cora.

"She is the most perfectly lovely woman I have ever seen," cried Leonard, enthusiastically, as the door closed behind them—they had entered the dining room while they were speaking their words of welcome.

"My boy, take care," replied Thomas Denbigh; and somehow a curious feeling of jealousy for his pet, Cora, crept into his heart, despite his assertion that he would never countenance their marriage.

"Remember, she, also, is your cousin."

Leonard made no immediate answer. He stood gazing out into the garden, over which a faint haze was hovering, hiding the sweet, pale flowers behind a fairy veil, thinking of the haughty, yet gracious, Agnes. No thought of love had as yet entered his mind with regard to his lovely cousin, and so his father's words fell upon unheeding ears; but her beauty had made an impression upon him, and his next words showed the drift of his imaginings.

"Do you not think, father, that we ought to have a little company to cheer Agnes up a bit? We have got into awfully quiet habits of late," he said.

"You forget her recent loss, my boy!" and Tom Denbigh's voice broke as he thought of the quiet grave in that far away country cemetery, where all that remained of his dearly-loved sister was laid.

"Indeed, I do not!" cried Leonard, putting his hand on his father's shoulder in silent sympathy; "but I did not mean a dance, or tennis party, or anything of that sort; I merely meant that I was afraid it would be dull for her here."

"Well, we will see about it. I suppose she will not be content with the companionship of her crotchety uncle and simple little aunt Judith, like my Cora," and he sighed.

Do coming events indeed cast their shadows before? If not, why had three out of the four who resided at Thanet House sighed, unconsciously, at the thought of Agnes Lester's visit?

The evening was a quiet, pleasant one, Agnes doing all in her power to ingratiate herself with her uncle. But though he liked her better as the night wore on, and she talked in that low, sweet voice of her dead mother, he felt that the loving tenderness that filled his heart when he thought of Cora, would never live there for Agnes.

Cora played several of her uncle's favourite songs when they went to the drawing-room after dinner. She was a splendid player, and there was power and pathos in the rich tones of her strong young voice, as she sang that exquisite song, "Only a dream."

"Your singing is perfect, Cora," whispered Agnes, as she kissed her "good-night" and closed her eyes in sleep; but in her heart she was

jealous of this beautiful girl, for she had found a rival at last, she felt convinced.

CHAPTER III.

"WHEN are you going, Cora?" the soft, sweet, surprised tones startled Cora, as she stood before the glass fastening the buttons of her outdoor jacket, and she flushed a rosy-pink to the roots of her gold-brown hair.

Agnes Lester had been at Thanet House more than a month when Leonard begged Cora to steal out for one of their old morning walks, and she, after a great deal of coaxing and persuasion, consented.

She rose just as the first golden shades of early morning tinged the Eastern sky, and the birds began to chirp in the broad oaks outside her bedroom window, and, moving softly about the room, was soon dressed; but even as she was congratulating herself upon the fact that Agnes was still sleeping, those words of inquiry fell upon her ears.

"I am going for a walk across the fields with Leonard," she replied, quickly, as she placed her velvet hat on her graceful head. "Will you come?"

"Yes, there is nothing I should like better!" cried Agnes, going to the window and drawing the lace curtains aside. "Why, the sun is only just rising. Is it not a glorious sight?"

Cora did not make any answer, for Agnes was gazing at her own reflection in the glass when she finished the sentence.

"Make haste, Agnes!" she said, presently, "Leonard will think I am not coming; besides, all the beauty of the morning will be gone."

"Nothing does a man so much good as a lesson in patience," smiled Agnes, as she slowly commenced coiling her rich masses of dead-gold hair around her head, while Cora stood gazing in genuine admiration at the lovely face and perfect upriser arms and splendid figure of this hitherto unknown cousin.

"Were all the women as lovely in that fashionable world to which Agnes belonged!" she asked herself, never dreaming in the sweet unconsciousness that she possessed a face over which an artist would dream, and a form as lithely beautiful as the Greek maidens of old.

As they opened the front door and stepped out on to the crisp gravel path, a flood of rosy light fell upon them, brightening their sombre dresses and lending a faint colour to the pure, calm face of Cora Denbigh.

It would have been difficult to decide which was the lovelier—the tall fair woman with the cold blue eyes and wealth of dead-gold hair and voluptuously perfect figure, or the slight, willowy girl with the rich heavy curls falling below her slender waist framing the sweet pale features that were lit by tender, dark blue eyes! And Leonard, coming across the smooth green lawn to greet them, felt a thrill of pleasure sweep through him as he gazed upon the picture.

"I did not know we were to be honoured by your presence, *ma belle cousine*!" he said, smiling.

"Well, neither did I," she responded, airily, "until I awoke this morning and saw Cora ready dressed; and when she told me that you were going for a ramble across the fields, I could not resist."

An uneasy feeling crept into Cora's heart as she saw the light that leaped into into Leonard's dark eyes as Agnes spoke. The words were simple enough in themselves; but, somehow, spoken in that silky insinuating voice, they seemed to have a hidden meaning, and both Cora and Leonard felt this.

"Come, Leonard, we shall not have much time for our walk," said Cora, in her usual tones, placing her hand on his arm. But he did not heed her gentle touch. He was bending over Agnes, who was saying something in a low voice about 'the sunrise' and 'dear mamma,' so she walked on by their side in perfect silence.

They took the same road that she and Leonard had traversed one short month back—but the world had changed since then.

The leaves were beginning to fall, and a soft-brown tinged those that were left on the trees, and the sweet flowers that had perfumed the air had already commenced to fade, giving place to the gaudy, unscented blossoms of early autumn.

Leonard, too, had changed, and a pained look dimmed Cora's dark blue eyes, as she thought of his words: "Do not let this Agnes Lester come between us." It had not been her fault, but assuredly this had come to pass! And she felt, as she glanced at the two walking along in the dreamy haze of the September morning, that Leonard had only asked her to come for this walk from compunction—not love—and the thought sent a proud flush to the beautiful face.

"Are you enjoying your walk, Cora?" asked Leonard, as the three paused under the shade of some old trees near the road.

"Of course I am. How could it possibly be otherwise?" she replied calmly, but there was a ring of sarcasm in the sweet voice, and the perfect lips were curved in a haughty smile; still the answer was the only one Leonard could have expected, and Leonard had to be content, though he had an uncomfortable sensation of being snubbed.

The three cousins lingered in the pleasant morning air, gazing at this view from some grassy eminence, and at that house enshrouded in feathery larches and tall nodding firs, until the mist had cleared away and the sun shone in deep yellow patches over field, river, and heath. Then Leonard took out his watch and exclaimed that it was past nine, and that pater would be in a temper if they did not hurry home.

But Agnes never hurried herself, no matter what was happening, so they had to suit their pace to hers, and as the clock struck the half-hour they entered the old-fashioned gate, and passed up the pathway to the long French window, where Aunt Judith was standing, a look of good-tempered impatience on her small, pleasant features.

"Here they are at last," she cried, stepping out on to the stone balcony and kissing the two girls. "Why, what a colour you have, Cora! Your walk has done you good."

Leonard turned and gazed into the fair girlish face, but the quiet, haughty glance she favoured him with did not please him—for although he admired her cousin's superb loveliness he was still jealous of Cora's love.

Tom Denbigh was standing at the window, as he had stood four weeks' back, but on this occasion there was no impatience in his tones as he greeted his son and niece.

"Good-morning, uncle!" said Cora, twirling her slim fingers in his beard and gazing affectionately into his face. "Is there any news of importance to impart to us that you stand there while breakfast waits?" she added, with a smile, pointing to an open letter which he held in his hand.

"Well, pet, you have guessed right. Uncle Jasper is coming down to see us in a few days, and he has written to apprise me of the fact. It is just like him, he never likes to come upon us unawares. Now mind, Leonard, you are civil to him; remember, you are his heir."

This was said with a laugh, for Tom Denbigh was the last person in the world to really entertain such ideas, and he had brought "his boy" up with very simple tastes. Moreover, he was deeply attached to this his only brother, the last of five stalwart, honourable men—three of whom had lost their lives in the service of their country.

"Oh, we shall make him welcome enough for his own sake, never fear!" laughed Leonard, in a pleased voice. (Uncle Jasper was a favourite with them all.) "What say you, Cora?"

"Next to Aunt Judith and Uncle Tom, I love him," said Cora, in the grave tones she always spoke in when affected in any way. Leonard glanced quickly at her to see if there was any malice premeditated in this remark, but she had turned to Judith Denbigh, and was speaking in an undertone to her.

"The deuce she does!" he muttered. "Then, I suppose, I come last," and the thought plucked his vanity so much that he paid his Cousin Cora

more than usual attention at breakfast that morning.

Agnes Lester's rose-leaf complexion deepened as she listened to the foregoing conversation, and the expression of those cold blue eyes would have surprised Leonard could he only have seen it; but she kept them studiously fixed upon her plate for some time, and when she raised the large white lids the eyes had regained their usual look.

"Uncle Jasper!" she then said. "I have heard dear mamma speak of him; but she loved you best, Uncle Tom."

"Yes, I was her favourite brother," he replied, in rather a husky voice. Then, as if to change the subject, "You had better get Jasper's old crib, the bedroom, ready; and, oh! I forgot to say, that George is coming, too. But I leave all the arrangements to you, Judith. You will manage to have a room fit for him to sleep in by the time they arrive, I daresay. Now, I must be off!"

George was Sir Jasper's secretary and *protégé*. Sir Jasper had never married, and George Newcombe, the orphan child of a dear friend, had become to him as a beloved son; and as he grew to manhood he decided that he could not part with him, and so, dismissing his secretary, he delegated George to his duties. This was done to render the young fellow independent—for, of course, he paid him a handsome salary.

Twelve o'clock had just struck on the following day when the two girls, who were standing at the breakfast-room window, heard the sound of carriage wheels, and in a few moments the heavy wooden gate was thrown open and the brougham bowed up the well-kept carriage drive.

Leonard was the first to alight, and he turned and held out his hand to his uncle, who pushed him aside, saying laughingly,—

"No, my boy, I am not feeble enough for that yet!"

"Just as hearty as ever—eh, Jasper!" cried Tom Denbigh, as he clasped his brother's hand, his grey eyes growing dim with emotion.

Sir Jasper Denbigh was a little above the middle height, stout, and well-built. His face was a striking one; the broad, high forehead gave an expression of nobility to the kindly countenance, bronzed by constant travelling, which the snowy hair, waving back from the temples, only served to enhance. He wore no beard, only a small, well-kept moustache. But the eyes told the character of the man—keen, piercing, hazel eyes that, as they glanced at the two beautiful girls standing before him, seemed to read every thought that was passing in their minds.

But there was yet another visitor—George Newcombe, the secretary. He was standing in the pathway conversing with Leonard, who had sent the carriage round to the stables, when, after the first joyous greetings were over, Sir Jasper turned to introduce him. He was a tall, slenderly-built young fellow, with crisp, black hair, a pale, aristocratic face, great, gleaming dark eyes, and a thin, red mouth, half concealed by a small black moustache; the nose was a peculiarly-shaped one, curving like the beak of a vulture, and gave a sinister, cunning look to the otherwise extremely handsome face.

"This is my adopted son, George Newcombe," said Sir Jasper, laying his hand affectionately on the young fellow's arm.

"I suppose we must call him George, uncle, or he will be jealous of Leonard," observes Agnes, smiling graciously, as she held out a slim, white hand.

"Just imagine, 'Mr. Newcombe,' hand me the salt, please," cried Sir Jasper, and he gave a hearty laugh, in which they all joined, as Tom Denbigh linked his arm in his brother's and led the way to the dining-room, where a lunch of unusual splendour was laid in honour of their guests.

That was a happy meal. How they all laughed and talked! Sir Jasper relating anecdotes of things that had occurred while over in India, turning now and then to George to say,—

"Now, George, give your version of this incident," then breaking out into a hearty laugh before the story was half finished.

Cora forgot her love troubles in the pleasure of seeing her uncle again. It was six years since he had visited England, and there was much to be told on both sides. Even Agnes awoke from her habitual languor and conversed animatedly with George Newcombe. Leonard was half inclined to be sulky at this, but he thought better of it, and joined in the general conversation.

It was not difficult for the most unobservant person to see that before day faded into night George Newcombe had succumbed to the charms of the beautiful, fascinating Agnes Lester. Here was a face to take men by storm, and, being a finished coquette, she knew well how to throw a tender light into those cold, blue eyes. She loved Leonard, but he had not declared himself, and so when George led her to the piano and bent over her while he selected his favourite songs, she amused herself by returning his looks of admiration by tender upward glances, drooping her golden lashes on to her peach-like cheek when he whispered some compliment into her dainty ear.

After a time Sir Jasper crossed the room to where Cora was sitting, in the shadow of the heavy curtains, gazing out into the moonlit grounds, and asked if she was not going to sing to her old uncle, who longed to hear his birdie's voice again.

"Do you remember the night you went away, Jasper?" said Miss Denbigh, laying her hand on her brother's. "Cora was scarcely more than a child then, but she sang beautifully. What was the last song? I know that there were tears in all our eyes when she finished."

"My Native Land, Good-night!" replied Cora. "Shall I sing that, uncle?" and she rose with easy, unaffected grace, and a bright, sweet smile on her fair face.

"Yes, dear, I should like to hear it again."

Leonard drew back from his position near the piano as Sir Jasper and Cora approached; and as his eyes met her calm, quiet orbs, he flushed, and, coming forward, offered to turn the music. But Sir Jasper waved him back with a laugh.

"Uncle never would let anyone turn my music, even when I was a child," she said, softly; then, striking a few chords, she commenced.

Agnes, who had taken a seat at a small table near one of the windows—George, of course, following—gave a start as the clear, strong voice rang through the room.

"What a magnificent voice!" exclaimed George, in hushed tones; and he turned and gazed at the singer.

He had not bestowed more than a passing glance upon her before, but now, as he looked upon her, he was surprised to see how lovely she was. Agnes, reading his thoughts, was piqued, and resolved to ensnare him. It would be good fun, she decided.

CHAPTER IV.

THE bells were ringing out joyously—peal after peal came softly, but distinctly, across the snow-clad country. No sound could be heard for miles save the merry joy bells ringing in the New Year.

At the open door of Thanet House, from whence the light flooded forth a golden stream on the glistening snow, stood Sir Jasper, his brother, and Miss Denbigh, silent but happy, with hand clasped in hand.

Presently Cora and Agnes joined the group, Leonard and George soon following.

"A Happy New Year to you all!" said Cora, slipping one hand through Sir Jasper's arm, and laying the other on Tom Denbigh's shoulder. "Aunt Judith, kiss me, I have no more hands."

And Miss Denbigh bent forward and pressed a long, loving kiss on the gentle, lovely face.

"Shall we walk round the house and listen to the bells from Hatherly!" suggested Leonard.

"By all means," replied his father; "but we old fogies will remain where it is warm."

"I say, old boy, speak for yourself," cried Sir Jasper, giving him a hearty slap on the back.

"I never intend to get old, but nevertheless, I shall stay where I am."

Cora had long ago given Leonard to understand that she wished their engagement at an end; and so when, on that January night, four months after Agnes Lester's arrival, the four young people sauntered out into the crisp snow-covered garden, Cora lingered behind, leaving Leonard and her cousin to go on alone.

There was a large conservatory at the South side of Thanet House with a flight of stone steps leading to a balcony outside, and towards this spot Cora and George bent their steps.

"The moon will come out from behind that bank of clouds presently, and we shall be able to see the church," he observed.

He loved Agnes with a mad, passionate love, that would stop at nothing to gain possession of the object of his passion, but there was something about the stately winning grace of Cora's manner that inspired him with a feeling of unworthiness whenever he was in her presence.

If ever George experienced a pure feeling for any woman that woman was Cora Denbigh, with her large calm eyes lit by the pure holy soul within—eyes that had often unconsciously stilled by a glance the tumult of passion that rose in his heart when Leonard took possession of Agnes as though she were his own.

Presently the moon appeared, as he had predicted, shining down on the whitened earth; on the old-fashioned church, which stood on the top of the hill, with its mantle of ivy showing darkly green against the snow that glistened amongst its leaves; on the hill itself, down which ran a crooked pathway bordered by tall trees, that waved and whispered in the night breeze as though anxious to get rid of their burden of glistening snow; and on two figures in the garden below—a man and a woman.

The woman's face, framed in a heavy mass of dead gold hair, was calm and smiling—the man's white, set, and determined.

"Agnes!" Cora started at the pain in Leonard's rich tones, and drew back into the shadow of the balcony; every word he uttered came to her distinctly. "Agnes! my love! my darling! have pity on me, and answer my question! I cannot bear suspense."

Then a change came over the beautiful face, the mocking smile died from the thin scarlet lips, and the cold blue eyes drooped beneath her lover's passionate gaze, and then Cora saw by the pale light of the moon the fair golden head sink on to Leonard's breast, as he clasped the tall, perfect form in his strong, young arms.

And still the bells rang out upon the crisp cold air, pealing, trembling as if for very joy, while Cora stood with clasped hands and wildly-beating heart gazing upon the wreck of her life's romance.

She could not see her own face—how white it had grown, nor the deep lines that had come round the purple eyes; but she felt, as she laid her head on her white folded hands, that there was no goodness or truth in the world.

Cora, in her first agony, had quite forgotten her companion, but suddenly remembering, she turned to find herself alone, and then she recollected that he had said something about going in to get a cigar.

She saw his shadow on the untrodden snow after a time, and gathering her crushed senses together, she waited his coming with a proud, cold smile on her lovely face.

Agnes and Leonard had walked slowly away down the narrow brown path under the avenue of trees that led to the fields adjoining the grounds—she with downbent head, his arm encircling her rounded waist; and Cora's eyes followed their retreating forms till a turn in the path hid them from view.

"You will pardon me, Cora," said George Newcombe's soft voice—almost too soft and smooth for sincerity, some people were uncharitable to pronounce it; "but Sir Jasper kept me talking about this new house of his—and I knew you were safe."

"I have not been at all lonely," replied the girl, in steady tones. "See, the moonlight falls straight down on to the dear old church with its glittering spire and quiet graves. How ghostly

the tombstones look! But the fields—do they not look lovely in their garb of white!"

George, instead of answering the hurried words of his companion, bent his dark head and gazed into the fair, proud face with an intent, earnest gaze that made the girl draw back a little into the shadow again.

"Why, how pale you look! Is it the moonlight, or what?" he exclaimed.

"The moonlight of course, George," she answered, with a short, hard laugh. "I wish you could see yourself; you are positively ghastly!"

"I think, mademoiselle, we had better return to the house before we have a serious quarrel. I can see the storm brewing in those violet eyes!" he said, with mock gravity, as he held out his hand.

The bells had ceased to ring for some time, and the silence seemed almost intense from the contrast as they retraced their steps along the snow-strewn pathway.

They found Sir Jasper making a speech about brotherly love with a glass of port-wine negus in one hand, while with the other he slapped Judith Denbigh and his brother, who stood beside him, on the back.

Tears were in the bright, keen eyes, but he had come back to old England for good, so he would not let them fall; besides, tears were for women—not men.

"Well, my boy," he cried, as George and Cora entered the room; "so you two are the first to come back to the uncle!" and a smile of infinite love lighted up the benign, manly countenance, telling of his great affection for George, his adopted son.

Agnes and Leonard were not long after them; they came in just as the party in the library were singing "Auld Lang Syne."

"What have you two been after?" asked Tom Denbigh, with a pleasant, unsuspecting laugh. But Leonard started guiltily, and paled as he glanced at Cora, who was regarding the pair with a scornful light in her usually calm, blue eyes.

Agnes neither shrank nor paled. There was a triumphant expression in the cold eyes, and a flush of excitement on the pearl cheek, while she toyed restlessly with a costly gemmed ring which she wore on her left hand. She stole a covert glance at Leonard, but he had turned to answer some remark of George's, and did not notice the look.

"Looking at the moonlight on the fields and the church, uncle!" she said, with a silvery laugh, and in her delight she did what no one had ever seen the haughty, indolent Agnes do before, flung her white jewelled arms around Tom Denbigh's neck, and gave him a little hug.

Then followed a great deal of kissing and laughter, and merry words called back, as the girls went up the stairs, and soon the whole household lay wrapped in slumber.

CHAPTER V.

NEXT morning broke bright and clear; the pale wintry sun shone down on the whitened glistening earth, and the robins hopped merrily about the broad, wide lawn, pecking at the crumbs that Cora had thrown to them. Here and there peeped out a dark gleaming evergreen from beneath the snow had fallen, and the tall leafless trees stood motionless in the frosty air; all was calm and peaceful as a poet's dream.

Presently a slight figure, clad in rich red with filmy lace at throat and wrists, appeared at one of the windows directly facing the lawn, and Cora's sweet, musical voice floated out on the silent air.

"Is it not a pretty sight, Agnes! Do come and look!"

George Newcombe, who was bending over the couch on which Agnes was reclining in the breakfast room, frowned slightly at this interruption; but Agnes, without appearing to notice him, rose with indolent grace, and crossed to where her cousin stood gazing out into the snow-clad garden.

Leonard was very silent during breakfast. He

had had his first experience of Agnes's selfishness, and it was not pleasant; and somehow a feeling stole over him that he had made a fool of himself, and taken the dress when he could have had the gold. Was it that his love for Cora was not dead, only clouded over by a brief mad infatuation for a heartless scheming woman of the world?

Cora retired to her own room after breakfast, pleading a headache, leaving Agnes to amuse the two young men, for Sir Jasper and his brother were going into the town on some secret errand, and Miss Denbigh was fully occupied with household affairs.

It was not one of the pleasantest mornings Agnes had spent during her stay at Thanet House; for George Newcombe, seeing that Leonard was the favoured one, made himself on all possible occasions very disagreeable to his rival; and so, when the three were left alone, Leonard took a seat at her side, George brought his chair across and sat glaring in moody silence at the pair.

"George! I declare one would believe you were plotting a murder!" said Agnes, at last, though in her usual languid tones. "Those great dark vindictive eyes of yours make me shudder!"

"You cannot imagine how sincerely sorry I am," he replied, with a smile, but his face grew pallid as death at her words, and the murderous gleam was still in his eyes when he went to the piano and commenced a song that Agnes had professed to be enchanted with a few evenings back.

"Agnes!" whispered Leonard, under cover of the music; "darling, you have not repented your promise!"

"No, Leonard!" sighed the rich, low voice as the beautiful woman lifted her pale eyes, then dropped the white lids till their long golden fringes swept her blushing cheeks; and Leonard, as he gazed at the lovely form and perfect features, felt tempted almost beyond his strength to take her in his arms and press quick loving kisses on her bright, scarlet lips.

"Hang the fellow!" he muttered; "he must see that he is in the way!"

But that was the very reason why George did not go. He hated Leonard, and did everything in his power to render him miserable. Glancing over his shoulder while he was singing, George saw the look that Agnes gave her cousin.

No one would have recognised the smooth-voiced, handsome George Newcombe in the white wild-faced man, who sang on in husky tones, and with blue, stiff lips that would scarcely perform their office.

"Curse him! He shall never possess her, that I swear!" he hissed through his parched lips, as he closed the piano with a bang that made the couple on the lounge start.

"Thank you, George, so much," murmured Agnes, with a soft, sweet smile. "That is one of my favourites."

But George had passed out of the room before she finished speaking, and as Leonard caught the girl to his throbbing heart they heard him slam the front door.

Leonard forgot as he held her in his arms, her fair face upturned to his, the episode of the morning. He remembered only that he, and he alone, possessed the right to hold this gloriously beautiful woman thus—that he alone could bring aright the blushes to the haughty face!

"My darling, you will never play me false!" he cried, passionately. "Swear, Agnes, that you will be true!"

And Agnes, laying one slim hand in his, whispered that nothing on earth should part them, sealing the vow with a kiss—the first she had given him of her own accord.

They sat on undisturbed until the sound of voices in the hall told them that Sir Jasper and Thomas Denbigh had returned home, and then they went out to greet them.

"Hullo, youngster!" cried Sir Jasper, in cheery tones, his keen eyes sparkling from the drive through the crisp, frosty air, his face tinged with a healthy pink. "Where is Cora?"

"She is still in her room, uncle," replied Agnes.

"Shall I call her?"

"Yes, call her down by all means. There goes the luncheon-bell."

Cora came down, looking pale, but she smiled brightly when her uncle kissed her fair face, asking how the poor head was.

"Better, uncle, thank you. I shall be quite well for our ball," was the ready answer, as she took a seat at the table, and a delicate colour rose to her cheeks as she met the gaze of Leonard's dark eyes. "He shall never think that I am fretting," she thought, and her heart gave a proud throb. "I will let him see to-night that all is forgotten."

The two girls had chosen dresses for the ball which was to be given that evening, alike, pale blue satin brocade, with over-dresses of Brussels lace, looped with forget-me-nots and snowdrops, and very lovely they looked when, some two hours later, they stood together in the dimly-lighted drawing-room waiting, as Sir Jasper laughingly said, to be inspected.

"By Jove! Tom, don't they look splendid!" he cried, as he turned the light full upon the two.

Leonard did not say one word; but his eyes, as they rested on Agnes Lester's glowing face spoke volumes.

Cora's proud heart throbbed as she saw that glance. Once it would have been for her; but she did not show it by look or gesture that she had even observed it. She turned with a swift, lovely smile to her uncle.

"Uncle Tom," she said, "do you really like my dress?"

"Like it? why, yes, of course; but it is my pet I am proud of; you will be the belle!" he replied, taking no notice of her almost unconscious glance in Agnes's direction.

And indeed Cora, in her calm, pure, young beauty, was a woman to be proud of. Her great blue eyes looked almost black in contrast with the pale blue of her dress, and her perfect neck and arms gleamed like snow against the flashing jewels.

Judith Denbigh entered, after a few moments, looking like some old-fashioned picture in rich purple satin and antique lace. She was well-known for dressing in accordance with her age, and in perfect taste; that night she surpassed herself, and not a few, both old and young, gave a second glance at the small, slight old lady with the silvery hair and sweet, smiling lips, as she moved with light-tripping steps among her brother's guests that night.

"It is a quarter-past nine," she said, after she had duly admired her nieces' attire. "We had better go to the reception-room. Hark! I think I hear carriage wheels."

And away she went, followed by her two nieces.

Soon after the guests began to arrive in quick succession, and as the great hall clock chimed the hour of ten the large ballroom was filled with light and laughter and music.

Greatly to the surprise of everyone Leonard opened the ball with his cousin Agnes, for the love affair between him and Cora was well known to their friends, some of whom declared that Tom Denbigh was a thorough good-hearted fellow, but terribly pig-headed in this matter.

As the music commenced Lord Chestholm, a slight young fellow, with a thick bronze moustache and dark, wavy hair, led Cora forward, and Leonard, seeing the happy light in his large grey eyes, flushed.

"Does the prig imagine that she will have him after all?" he muttered, biting his moustache, savagely, even while Agnes's fair face was near his own, her warm breath fanning his cheek, her heart throbbing against his.

The ball was at its height, the dancers whirled round the great room with bright, flushed faces and beating hearts.

The dreamy music flooded out into the moonlit balcony overlooking the garden, where stood two figures dimly outlined against the shrubs that gleamed darkly green in the misty light; two figures, a man and a woman, the woman clad in pale blue brocade and priceless lace, with costly jewels on her neck and arms that flashed and glittered with every movement.

Raising her eyes, that gleamed with hidden

triumph, to her companion's dark face, the woman spoke in soft accents thrilling with real or well-feigned sorrow.

"You must not say such wicked things, George; you will learn to forget me soon."

"Agnes, do not trifle with me!" cried George Newcombe—for it was he. "In mercy's name give me an answer. Will you or will you not be my wife?"

There was a ring of desperation in his voice, and his face as he turned it towards the deep blue sky, where the stars were twinkling and the moon was shining in calm, silvery splendour, was pallid and drawn with emotion.

"I cannot give you an answer at once, George," replied Agnes, in a voice not quite so steady as usual.

For once in her life Agnes Lester felt sorry that she had played the coquette. She was thoroughly frightened at the passion she had roused in this man's heart. Why could he not be like the others, and when he found she had no love to give quietly bow to her decision?

"Darling, your answer shall be 'yes!'" His arms were round her supple waist, his lips pressed hers in passionate kisses, and Agnes, though a tall woman, was like a child to him in his mad passion, and, try as she would, it was impossible to release herself from his embrace.

Leonard coming into the conservatory with Cora recognised the two standing there in the moonlight, and started back with a low, strangled cry.

"Detestable coquette!" he said, in a hoarse undertone, grasping Cora's slim hand in his. "Cora, do you see those two?"

"Yes, Leonard," she returned, in pretended surprise; "they are my cousins Agnes and George Newcombe."

"But she has no right to stand there with his—!" He stopped short. He had not as yet spoken a word of his love for Agnes, and somehow he had felt in no hurry to do so. What would Cora think of his behaviour? He asked himself. He did not know that she had been an unseen witness to that love scene in that snow-clad garden.

"Have you any right to dictate with whom she shall stand in the 'pale moonlight!'" said Cora, with a cold laugh, as she turned in the direction of the ball-room again.

Leonard's handsome face flushed, and he bit his lips to force back the bitter words that rose to them. Cora should never know that he had been fooled, as he termed it, by her beautiful, heartless cousin!

"I felt disgusted, that is all. George Newcombe does not bear a very good character amongst our set," he answered; "and I naturally felt indignant."

"Oh—cousins regard!"

The sneer in the calm, icy tones was unmistakable, and Leonard winced, for he felt that he was acting a coward's part in not openly announcing his engagement.

Could Leonard Denbigh have read his own heart aright he would have been surprised. His mad passion for Agnes Lester was as different to the love he had felt for Cora as dark is from light, and, though he knew it not, it was already on the wane. His pride was hurt—not his heart—at the thought of Agnes Lester's coquetry.

Lord Chestholm and his mother were the first to go, and this was a signal for a general break up, for soon the great room was deserted, the lights were extinguished, and the members of the family had retired to rest.

CHAPTER VI.

DURING the next three or four weeks Sir Jasper kept Leonard pretty well occupied, for he was busy furnishing his new house, which was about half-an-hour's drive from Thanet House, and he referred to his nephew on all subjects.

Leonard chafed inwardly at this, for he could find no time to speak to Agnes of her flirtation with George Newcombe; and she, safe in the belief that he knew nothing, kept George in suspense for his answer.

George had no doubt what that answer would be. If Agnes had meant to refuse him she would have said so at once. So he argued, little dreaming that she was already bound by her most sacred promise to Leonard Denbigh. Better for him had she told him that his love was hopeless on that first night. It would have saved him from himself.

In the long months to come no haunting memory of a cruel, dastardly act of base ingratitude to a generous benefactor would have driven sleep from his burning eyes and peace from his guilty heart. But she smiled on him that soft, fascinating smile that had lured dozens to their fate, and so he, too, went blindly on to his doom. Perhaps—who knows?—she had been more like her pure and innocent cousin Cora, his life might have been a different one.

"To-morrow will be St. Valentine's Day!" said George one evening, as the four young people sat round the fire in Cora's own sitting-room.

Miss Denbigh and her brother had gone out to see some old friends, and Sir Jasper was busy in the library looking over some papers relating to his house.

"Yes, and I expect a great many valentines," she replied, softly, glancing up into his dark, passionate face with a coquettish smile. "Do you get many as a rule, Cora?"

Cora, who was leaning back in her low chair gazing steadily into the bright red flames, started as her cousin spoke.

"I beg your pardon, Agnes! I was thinking, and so did not hear what you said."

Agnes, who knew all about the love-passages that had passed between Leonard and her cousin Cora, laughed maliciously as she replied,—

"Dreaming of a lost love, Cora! Recreant lovers are not worth a thought, believe me. But to return to the original subject. I asked you if you were in the habit of receiving many valentines?"

"Oh, yes, dozens!" she said, calmly, taking apparently no notice of the unwomanly taunt, but her heart throbbed with mortification, and a deep red spot burned on her clear, pale cheek as she pictured the gratified smile that must have played over Leonard's face at her cousin's words.

They were sitting in the twilight and therefore she could not see his features as he sat well back from the glowing fire with his arms folded across his breast.

"You will get one valentine to-morrow which I hope will please you!" and George bent his head till his dark eyes met the pale blue ones.

Leonard started forward as he caught the look on George's face, and saw the red colour that mounted to the roots of the girl's golden hair.

"Agnes!" he said, sharply, and she turned to him in languid surprise.

"Why, Leonard, you quite startled me," she said, quietly. "You have been so silent that I thought you had fallen asleep. Did not you, Cora?"

Cora made no answer. Though there was no love lost between them, she did not wish to be rude to her cousin, and she felt assured that Agnes was perfectly aware that Leonard had been watching her for the last ten minutes. She bent forward and poked the fire, and the flames leaping up the wide, old-fashioned chimney showed Leonard's dark face flushed with anger.

He rose suddenly, and stooping over the indolent form, whispered something into the dainty ear, then resumed his old attitude, that dark frown and angry flush still marring the careless beauty of his face.

The hall clock was only just chiming the hour of ten when the servant, at Cora's request, brought their bed-room candles, but as Miss Denbigh said they were all fatigued with their day's shopping, for the two girls had been with her in the morning on a shopping expedition, and would be glad of a good night's rest.

The 14th of February dawned bright and clear, a warm wind, laden with the promise of spring, came through the open window, and the musical sound of the church bells ringing for early morning prayer was wafted across the heath,

sending a thrill of hopefulness to Cora's heart as she stood at the hall door drinking in the fair freshness of the morning.

She was thinking of the last St. Valentine's Day when she had come out to meet Leonard so that he should be her valentine, he had laughingly told her. There was no moping sorrow in the pale young face, only an expression of thought and regret.

"I wonder who will be your valentine, Cora!" said Agnes Lester's low, seductive voice; and at that moment Leonard came round the side of the house with a smile on his handsome face.

"Good morning, Cora!" he cried, eagerly—almost as eagerly as in the dear dead past. "You are the first person I have seen—my valentine!"

"You are quite gushing this morning, Leonard," and Agnes put her slim hand on Cora's shoulder as she spoke, a mocking, ugly glitter in her pale blue eyes.

"Am I!" he returned, laconically, as he held out his hand. "You are the first person who has ever accused me of being 'gushing,'" and he laughed a short, hard laugh as he entered the hall and passed into the breakfast-room.

The young girl watched his retreating form, a slow smile creeping over her beautiful face. Her heart throbbed with bitter resentment at the tone in which he had addressed Cora, but she would not show that she had observed it. Not now; she would wait.

"I say you girls!" cried Sir Jasper, as the two entered the breakfast-room, where the brothers and Miss Denbigh were standing in front of a blazing fire. "Don't you think you had better postpone the opening of those?" pointing to a pile of white cardboard boxes—some crushed, some perfectly spotless.

"Suppose we put it to the vote!" said Cora, with a bright smile; "those for postponing hold up your hands."

"What is the matter?" asked George Newcombe, who came in just as they all held up their hands; and on being told a dark frown crossed his brow—a frown that altered the whole expression of his face.

"Really, one would think that you were the most interested person, to judge by the vindictive manner in which you are carving at that poor fowl!" said Agnes, glancing with indolent scorn at his disfigured visage.

"Perhaps I am an interested person," was the answer, given in a low, significant tone, that brought a slight flush to the pearly skin.

"Do you remember what lovely valentines you had the year before last?" asked Miss Denbigh, addressing Cora, who flushed, then paled, as she answered, without looking up from her plate,—

"Yes, auntie!"

"I fancy you will not have very many this year!"

There was a mocking smile lurking round the thin scarlet lips, and a look of spite in the cold blue eyes, as Agnes bent forward and uttered these words in a low tone.

"Very likely not, Agnes," replied Cora, in her clear, girlish voice. "A great many of our friends will remember that I have recently lost my aunt, and, although I am out of mourning, will not consider that she has gone from my memory."

Agnes, with all her *sans froid*, had no words to answer this reproach—for reproach she felt it to be—and so she continued her breakfast in silence.

Leonard looked across the table at the lovely calm, *spirituelle* face, and then back again at Agnes, who was seated by his side; and in that glance, there was an unconscious comparison of the two, not very complimentary to the beautiful woman who had infatuated his senses.

Breakfast over, the valentines were piled on the centre table, and the two girls commenced the pleasant task of opening them.

"How lovely!"

The exclamation came from Agnes. She had opened a small box, and disclosed lying on a soft bed of pale blue velvet, a hoop of pearls set in dull gold.

"Who can have sent it!" she continued, glancing quickly at Leonard, but his face wore

no tell-tale smile, so she turned to George Newcombe. "Is it not a beauty, George?"

"It is very pretty," he answered. "Will you wear it, Agnes?" he added, with betraying eagerness.

"Most certainly. It is perfect!"

In the excitement no one had noticed Cora draw back with flushed face and quivering lips, after reading some words written on a delicately-painted valentine.

"You do not seem pleased with your valentine?" said Leonard's voice at her elbow.

"Pleased!" she echoed, in scorn. "It is the greatest piece of impertinence and effrontery I have ever heard of!"

Leonard grew pale to his very lips, as he turned, without another word, and walked to the furthestmost window.

He was in a white heat of rage with Agnes, for he had heard George's whispered words about the ring and seen Agnes's glance as she murmured her reply—and Cora had received his valentine as though it were a deadly insult.

"Are you going for a walk, Leonard?" said Agnes, in a soft, sweet undertone, crossing the room and laying her white hand—on which gleamed George's ring—upon his shoulder.

"No, I am not," he replied; "but I wish to speak to you alone for a few moments, if you can spare time!"

"Oh, certainly!" she answered, with a graceful inclination of her fair head. "At once, if you like. Come!" and she pushed open the long French window and stepped out into the cool, fresh air.

The trees were already beginning to put forth long green shoots, the birds were singing sweetly on their long brown branches, and the clear February sun was shining down on the fair earth in a pale golden flood.

The two lovers walked along the quaint old pathways in perfect silence, until they reached a quiet summer-house, far away from the house itself, in a small hollow.

Leonard paused here, and then drew Agnes into the summer-house, pointing silently to a seat, and thus they remained for some minutes—she idly turning the rings on her slim fingers with that slow, scornful smile on her parted lips, he gazing his moustache and gazing in moody abstraction across the fields.

An impatient movement from Agnes at last roused him, and he turned to her with a savage gleam in his dark eyes.

"Do you mean to accept that fellow's ring, Agnes?" he asked, in a low voice.

He had never yet raised his voice to a woman, and great as was his passion, he kept it under in respect to her sex.

"I do not understand you, Leonard," she replied, calmly; but the smile faded from her lips, leaving her very pale.

"You understand me well enough, Agnes, so do not prevaricate. Did you mean what you said to George Newcombe this morning, or did you not?"

"Most certainly, if you are referring to the valentine he sent me! I have the ring on now," and she held her hand out to him. "It fits perfectly."

"And you mean to keep it there?"

His voice was hoarse with suppressed passion, and his proud lips quivered as he turned his eyes, blazing rather with wounded pride than love, upon the fair face of his beautiful, false-hearted cousin.

"I mean to wear it—sometimes," was her only reply, given with a defiant upraising of the fair head, with its crown of dead-gold hair; while the blue eyes, so coldly blue, gazed at him in mocking scorn.

"Then, I will bid you good-morning, Miss Lester. I have no doubt you will be able to find your way to the house," he said, haughtily, and with a slight bow he turned on his heel, and strode away through the straggling pathways under the tall, grim firs, then disappeared from sight behind a high hedge.

"So that is the tone you will take after our marriage," said Agnes, to herself, quietly smiling, as she leisurely retraced her steps.

"Master Leonard will find that I, too, have a spirit!"

It never occurred to her in her scornful arrogance that perhaps Leonard would not so easily forget her conduct.

CHAPTER VII.

A LONELY spot was the Glendale waterfall. Nothing broke the stillness save the thunder of the mighty torrent as it dashed in a glistening, silvery sheet down the rocky incline that led from its source.

Great moss-grown rocks lay around in wild picturesqueness, and as far as the eye could reach ran a narrow stream, overhung by drooping willows.

A romantic spot, too; for to the right and to the left stretched a deep, green carpet, dotted here and there with clusters of tall trees and bushes, which in the sweet summer time were rendered fair to the eye by the white briony by which they were overran.

There were innumerable natural caves and glens in this secluded place, over which the sun was shining. A soft, balmy breeze was blowing, rustling the tiny leaves on their branches, and ruffling the long, pale grass.

There was a solemn grandeur in the scene. The stately elm, the broad-chested oak, just budding into leaf, the rocky hill looking as though it met the clear, grey sky above, and the steady roar of the rushing torrent. No sign of life save for the birds that hopped from bough to bough of the trees that overhung the stream.

Presently the sound of voices mingled with the rush of the water, then a party of gaily-dressed people came into sight. Sir Jasper—for it was the family from Thanet House who had broken the solitude of the glen—turned to his niece Agnes with a look of pleasure on his kind, old face, saying—

"What do you think of the waterfall?"

"It is indeed worth seeing, uncle Jasper," she returned, languidly.

There was no enthusiasm in her nature, and she could not understand why Cora stood there with that calm, rapt expression on her lovely face, gazing at the scene before her.

"We are going to the Lover's Glen," said George Newcombe, taking Agnes Lester's slim, pink-gloved hand in his own, and placing it on his arm.

"I shall stay here with auntie," replied Cora. Leonard had already thrown himself on the soft, yielding sward at their feet, and Sir Jasper and Thomas Denbigh had walked away in the direction of a winding pathway leading to the height above.

Two days had elapsed since that scene in the garden, and the ring which Leonard had forbidden her to wear still gleamed on Agnes's slender finger. Yet he did not feel so despairing as he had thought he should, for of course their engagement was at an end; he only felt a deep, bitter anger against the woman who could act as she had done.

He gazed absently after their retreating figures till only an occasional glimpse of Agnes's pale pink dress could be obtained through the thick underbrush; then he turned to Cora with a suppressed sigh.

Meanwhile, Agnes and George had passed up the long, tedious pathway, and so to the top of the hill, which commanded a splendid view of the waterfall and surrounding country.

"Will you sit down, Agnes?" said George, pointing to a great boulder of rock overshadowed by a pollard willow, and screened by a clump of bushes; and Agnes seated herself, leaning back in an apparently unstudied attitude, that showed every superb line of her faultless figure.

"How soft and pleasant the air is," she murmured, twisting the rings round on her fingers.

She had removed her gloves to pluck some wild flowers that had taken her fancy, and which were now lying withered at her feet.

"The air is lovely, Agnes; but it is not of that I wish to speak. Will you give me your answer now? Nay, you must, for I can bear this suspense no longer, and he grasped both

her hands in his, and attempted to draw her to him; but, with a violent effort, she released herself.

"Hush!" she whispered; and then he became aware that some one was standing on the other side of the bushes.

"Yes, Tom," said Sir Jasper's hearty, manly voice; "I have got over that absurd prejudice against cousins marrying—those are Judith's words, but I now endorse them. It is an absurd prejudice! But, still, as I have always led George to believe himself my heir, I cannot disappoint him. I have made my will, for though I am hearty and strong still—"

"Come, old boy, I can't stand that! You know we all wish you a long life," returned his brother, and the two listeners could detect the sound of tears in his tones.

"Of course, I know that; but as I said, I have made a will leaving the bulk of my money to George. My estate in Cumberland will go to Leonard, and he has his own money, so he cannot grumble."

"And now that is off your mind," cried Tom Denbigh's voice, "suppose we return to the others, have lunch, and then march for home."

Perfect silence reigned after these words. Not a sound broke the stillness, but as the ground was extremely soft, George concluded that they must have left the spot.

"You heard what Sir Jasper said!" exclaimed George, and there was a ring of exaltation in his smooth voice. "Now Agnes, my peerless Agnes, will you give me your answer?"

"But I—"

"Nay, darling, do not bring in that word! I can offer you a home fit for a queen, jewels, carriages, things that I never thought to possess, for—with a scornful laugh—"the old fool, much as he prides himself on his health, cannot live for ever. He is seventy now and then—"

"George!" said Agnes, raising her eyes to his passive, pale face.

"Oh, of course, I am very fond of the old boy," he continued, fancying that cry was meant for a reproach, but he was mistaken. She was just congratulating herself for not having let Leonard announce their engagement when he asked her. "Still, I should prefer his money. Darling, is it yes?"

Agnes smilingly held out her hand, and he caught her to his breast, pressing kiss upon kiss on her scarlet lips. And even while she lay passively in his arms she sighed, for all the love her shallow soul had to give belonged to Leonard Denbigh.

After a time they remembered Tom Denbigh's remark about lunch, and rising hurriedly they made their way down the winding path, bordered by short, thick furze and prickly broom.

"We thought you were lost," remarked Cora, looking up from her place, as they seated themselves on the grass on arriving once more at the waterfall. "We waited a long while, but you were so late in coming that we commenced."

Sir Jasper glanced covertly across at his adopted son, and George meeting his gaze, coloured and turned away; while a cold cynical smile that still had in it a spice of pain broke over Sir Jasper's kindly features.

Darkness was stealing over the earth when the carriage containing the small party from Thanet House drove up the avenue. A thin mist had risen, and was hovering over the square red-brick building, and the lights in the rooms gleamed warmly forth through the many small-paned windows.

"This evening is like my life," remarked Sir Jasper, as they walked across the lawn. "A little, very little happiness and brightness peering through the mist."

"You are not well, Jasper," said his sister, laying her hand on his arm, while Cora looked anxiously into his face.

"Why are you looking like that, Cora? What if I am ill, you forget that I have money to leave," he cried, bitterly.

"Uncle!" It was Cora's voice, low and quivering with pain that uttered that one word, but there was a world of tender reproach in the tone that ten thousand words could not have expressed.

"Cora, my child, forgive me!" he said, drawing her to him. They were in the hall, and the light fell full upon her pale face and tear-dimmed eyes. "I know that my pretty Cora at least is true." But all that evening he remained moody and silent, answering their questions only in monosyllables; and Judith Denbigh confided to Cora as she kissed her that night that she was afraid he was seriously ill.

Thursday arrived in due course, and as they rose from lunch Sir Jasper announced in a grave, subdued voice that he should not be able to attend Lady Oestholm's party fixed for that evening, as he had some very important business to transact.

"But—! It it not wait, uncle!" coaxed Cora, putting her hand up to his face, with a caressing touch. "It will do you so much good. Come for my sake!"

"No, Cora! Not even to please my pet can I leave this thing undone. We never know what may happen, and justice is justice!" And with these ambiguous words he stooped down and kissed her and then walked from the room.

Faintly the moonbeams gleamed through one of the upper windows of Thanet House, the mingling shadows of the tall trees outside, and the quaint old furniture within casting queer fantastic shapes athwart the carpeted floor.

A massive bedstead faced the window, and the moonbeams stealing shyly across the room, as though fearful that even their soft touch would awake the sleeper, rested gently on the calm features and silver hair of Sir Jasper Denbigh. Once he moved, and a smile like that one bestows upon a beloved one played round his mouth, and a name, breathed lowly, fell upon the stillness.

"George!" That one word, only it was evident the dreamer was happy.

Presently the door moved slowly on its hinges, and in the mysterious light there appeared the figure of a man. He advanced with stealthy tread a few steps; then, as though in fear, paused again with a guilty glance round the well-furnished room in which there seemed so many dark corners and lurking places; he went forward swiftly but noiselessly and drew aside the heavy curtain that draped the bedstead, and stood with folded arms gazing down at the placid face of the sleeping man.

Sir Jasper's face, tinged even in slumber with the pink glow of health, was peaceful as a child, and the smile still lingered round the firm mouth.

The man turned his head towards the window, and the pale moonlight showed a thin aristocratic face and dark eyes glittering with an unholly fire.

He shuddered as a distant clock slowly and distinctly chimed the hour—one, two, three. It sounded to him like the knell for his guilty soul, and when the last echo had died away in a soft quivering note he breathed a low sigh of relief.

Now was the moment! A cloud passed across the moon as he bent over the still unconscious form. There was a slight movement as though the sleeper had been disturbed, and then utter stillness reigned, and Sir Jasper was once more alone!

But what is this! The features a moment back tinged with pink were pale and set and the eyes open, staring glassily at the moonlit casement, while a dull red stream slowly trickled over the white coverlet. There was no life in those pallid, ghastly features, and the smile that had softened them was replaced by a look of agony. Sir Jasper Denbigh was dead!

"Uncle Jasper not down yet!" said Cora, in surprise, as they assembled round the breakfast table next morning.

"No, I have sent John up to see if he is unwell, or perhaps he has gone for a stroll," replied Tom Denbigh, looking up from his newspaper.

George Newcombe was seated by Agnes Lester's side, talking animatedly, while Leonard stood leaning against the black marble mantelpiece, watching every changing expression on his cousin Cora's face. His heart had returned to its old allegiance, but as yet he dared not speak.

Suddenly, amidst the gay laughter and the merry talk, there rang through the house a despairing cry—the cry of men and women—and Thomas Denbigh rose with a white set face, and a strange, undefinable feeling of dread at his heart.

Was that cry in any way connected with his brother? he asked himself as he strode to the door and flinging it open stood staring in speechless amazement at the group of affrighted servants who had gathered in the great hall, the women wringing their hands and moaning, the men silent, horrified.

"Joseph, what does this mean!" he said, almost sternly, in his dread.

"I—oh, poor Sir Jasper!" gasped the man.

Sir Jasper! His dread, his presentiment of evil was not then so foolish. Something had indeed happened to his brother, the only one left, and now, perhaps, he too—

"Tell me what it is, my man," he said again, pushing the thought from him with a mighty effort.

The rest of the family had followed him, and were standing gazing at the horror-stricken servants with wide, terrified eyes.

"I went up, sir, as you told me, and knocked two or three times, and receiving no answer I turned the handle and found to my surprise that the door was unlocked, so I walked in and then—"

At this juncture the faithful old valet covered his face with his hands and sobbed.

"For Heaven's sake tell me the worst, at once!" cried Tom Denbigh, in a hoarse whisper, as the man replied in a low trembling voice,—

"There on the bed lay Sir Jasper, stabbed through the heart, with the sun streaming in on his dead face!"

"Stabbed!"

The word sent a thrill of indignation through every heart. Nay, not every heart, for a feeling of exultation came over Agnes as she thought that now George was rich.

"Good heavens!"

These were the only words the bereaved brother uttered, but a strong man's agony breathed in the piercing accents, and the rugged features were convulsed with emotion.

When the horrid truth was told, Cora had reeled for a moment as though about to faint, but she knew that her aunt's grief was worse than her own, and, mastering her feelings with a strong effort of will, she turned, only just in time, to her aunt, who fell forward into her outstretched arms.

With the assistance of one of the servants she was carried up to her room, where she remained till long after the inquest; which proved nothing save that Sir Jasper had been foully murdered, but by whom there was not the slightest clue to tell.

After the funeral—that saddest and most solemn of ceremonies—the family assembled in the library to hear the reading of the will. The blinds had been drawn up and the warm sunshine glinted in upon the mournful group.

Cora sat between her uncle and aunt, who had been carried down for the first time since Sir Jasper's death, pale but quiet, with dark circles under the large blue eyes and a drooping curve to the sweet mouth.

Tom Denbigh had aged ten years since his brother's cruel death; his usually upright figure was bent and his bronzed features were sad and care worn; but Judith, his sister, who was leaning back in her arm chair, looked utterly broken down, deep lines marked her pale, thin face, and her silvery hair seemed to have grown scant at the temples.

And Agnes, she also formed one of this waiting group; but, like George, there was no sorrow in her callous bosom for the man who had met with so untimely a death. And she shaded her face with one slender hand, so that they might not see her eyes, which were brimful of triumph.

The will was read, amidst breathless silence. George leant forward with a hungry look in his dark eyes, and the same golden shaft of sunlight that kissed Cora's fair, innocent face, fell upon his glossy head.

"You will be a very wealthy man, Mr. Newcombe," observed the lawyer, as he folded up the will. The bulk of Sir Jasper's immense fortune was left unconditionally to George; Fernlands, a snug little estate in Cumberland, went to Leonard. This, with a few legacies to friends, a settlement of two hundred a year on his two nieces, and a handsome gift to his brother and sister, formed the substance of the will.

Tom Denbigh listened to the soft voice of the lawyer, with a puzzled expression on his face; but no one noticed him in the excitement.

"I—I hope you will excuse me," muttered George, walking to the door; "this has been such a surprise. It has quite unnerved me," and without waiting for a response, he hurried out of the room.

"Poor George!" said Tom Denbigh, with a faint grave smile; "he was very fond of him. But," he added, "Jasper told me that he had made a new will. I must have made a mistake."

Soon those friends who had attended the funeral took their leave, and those who were left behind—the family of the murdered man—crept up to their own rooms, glad to be alone.

Agnes gave a shiver as she passed the red room where Sir Jasper had slept.

"I shall write to Mrs. Lorton," she said, mentioning one of her fashionable friends, "and ask her if she can accommodate me for a little while."

"But why, Agnes?" asked Cora, in surprise.

"Why, because it gives me the horrors to move about this house after what has happened. I feel as if the place is uncanny. I wish," almost petulantly, "that Uncle Jasper had never come here! A murder is such an unpleasant thing to—"

"Hush, Agnes!" cried Cora, turning her great eyes, ablaze with indignation, upon her cousin's beautiful soulless face. "I am ashamed to hear a relation of my dear uncle's speak in such a heartless manner!"

"Ashamed!" echoed Agnes, with a laugh and a smile that somehow seemed to detract from her beauty. "Really, Cora, you are in a bad temper! But I will not quarrel with you now; I shall not be here much longer!" and she turned and walked away in the direction of their room.

She kept her word, and the next day was being whirled along to London as quickly as the train could bear her.

"Cora," said Leonard, in a strangely husky voice as they drove back along the quiet, country road after leaving the station, where they had gone to see her off, "I have something to say—something to ask!"

"What is it, Leonard?"

The voice was low and steady, but her heart throbbled passionately at his tone.

"My darling! Cora, my sweet cousin! will you forgive me for all, and take me back!" he cried, dropping the voice and catching her slender black-gloved hand in his own.

"Leonard, that cannot be!" she replied, sadly. Her voice was trembling now, and her great eyes were filled with tears. "I have forgiven you, but I cannot forget. Let the past be the past indeed. Do not speak so to me again—at least not yet—everything is all so recent."

"Oh, Cora, my love!" he exclaimed, with quivering lips, "I am a great unfeeling brute. But," he added, "your words have given me hope. I will prove to you that my love is, and always was yours, in spite of all that has happened."

When they drove up the carriage-drive at Thanet House Miss Denbigh and her brother were at the door, and something in the two young faces struck a chord of hope and peace in their hearts.

"I think Jasper was right," observed Leonard's father, mentioning his brother's name for the first time. "It is a foolish prejudice," and Judith, following the direction of his eyes, had no need to ask his meaning.

CHAPTER VIII.

"CLYNTON LODGE, MAIDA VALE.

"DEAR CORA,—You will, perhaps, be surprised to hear that I am going to be married, and to George Newcombe. He proposed to me the day before Sir Jasper's death, and I had no opportunity of telling you, and afterwards it seemed unfeeling." (A smile bitter in its contemptuous scorn, broke over the fair face at that last word, then she returned to the perusal of her letter.) "The wedding is to be on the 20th; will you be my bridesmaid? I shall esteem it a great favour if you consent. Let me know as soon as possible, and with fond love to dear auntie and uncle,

"Believe me, your affectionate cousin,

"AGNES LESTER."

"P.S.—Do not forget to give my love to Leonard. I think George has asked him to be his groomsmen."

Six months had passed since that awful tragedy had been enacted in the red room at Thanet House, and Cora had put aside her heavy mourning at her aunt's request, and the old house had sunk back into its old, peaceful calm.

Only one thing was wanting. Leonard was away. He went soon after Agnes's departure, telling Cora, as he bade her good-bye, that when he came back he should ask her that same question, when he hoped he would receive a different reply; and Cora, blushing deeply, had raised her eyes to his face without a word, but he went away hopeful.

The murderer of Sir Jasper Denbigh was never found, and as the time passed on, Judith and her brother were content that it should be so. His discovery could not bring the dead to life; it would only rake up old sorrows and re-open wounds that were closed; and so, at the end of six months they had the bill, offering one thousand pound's reward for the apprehension of the murderer or murderers, taken down.

"What does Agnes say?" asked Judith Denbigh.

"She is going to be married, and—but there is the letter, auntie you can read for yourself," replied her niece, placing the note in her hand. "Of course I shall go," she added. "So as soon as you have the time to spare we will see about getting our things ready."

Crossing the room as she finished speaking, Cora pushed open the long French window, and stood gazing out into the garden. A soft balmy breeze came in, lifting the fluffy hair on her white brow, and fluttering the delicately-tinted lavender ribbons on her black robe.

There was a tender light in the deep purple eyes, and the perfect mouth was curved in a loving smile. Perhaps Leonard would come to this wedding, and she would again see the face which was dearer than all others to her loyal heart.

Lord Chestholm and his mother had promised to stay at Thanet House during the absence of the family.

They arrived in the evening of the day before they started, and they all sat down to supper, a very happy party in spite of their sorrow, whose bitterness was somewhat blunted by the tender hand of time.

They found Agnes and Mrs. Lorton waiting for them when they arrived at the end of their journey next day, and Cora thought her cousin looked more beautiful than ever, as she stepped forward to greet them with a bewitching smile on her scarlet lips.

"It is kind of you to come so soon. I am so glad," she cried, and the tone for her was quite excited.

"Well! we thought we would take advantage of our charming hostess's invitation to stay a fortnight," said Tom Denbigh, with a courtly bow; and Mrs. Lorton, a handsome dark woman, with snowy teeth, and a colour that rivalled a damask rose, bowed in response, favouring him at the same time with a gracious smile.

They were soon bowling along in the carriage, which, after a short time, drew up in front of a large stone house, with carved pillars on either side, the steps reaching to the roof.

"You will show your cousin her room," remarked Mrs. Lorton, as she led Miss Denbigh away, having consigned Tom Denbigh to her husband's care.

That evening was a very quiet, pleasant one. There were several guests at the dinner-table, amongst them George Newcombe, looking pale, but handsome as ever, though there was a watchful expression lurking in the gloomy depths of his dark eyes that spoke conscience ill at ease.

Saturday, the day fixed for the wedding, broke bright and clear. The birds sang merrily in the old trees that sheltered the house from the gaze of passers-by, and the sun poured into the room where Agnes was being arrayed in her bridal robes in a flood of liquid gold.

"A good omen," observed one of the bridesmaids, setting her pink satin train more to her liking.

There is no need to describe the marriage ceremony, or to tell how Agnes waked with queenly even steps to the altar, where George Newcombe was awaiting her; nor how Cora followed, with a pale smile on her lovely features, and yet more stately tread, in her sweet, unconscious grace. Suffice it to say that the wedding was over, the bells burst forth in a merry peal, reaching even to the room where the guests were seated, and George and his bride had started on their wedding tour.

Four days after the wedding they arrived at Clynton Lodge a letter for Thomas Denbigh, addressed in Lord Chestholm's handwriting.

"Bless my soul!" he almost shouted, as he finished reading.

"Why, Tom, whatever is the matter?" asked his sister, staring at him in amazement.

"The matter? Why, the matter is that, if what Lord Chestholm tells me is true, Agnes will not find her husband the wealthy man he now thinks him," he replied, more calmly.

"You will pardon me for my unceremonious behaviour, but I must return home at once," he added, turning to his hostess who has liked to assure him that they her husband and herself, could quite sympathize with him—she was quick enough to see that something extraordinary had occurred.

Cora and her aunt were too surprised to speak, and Thomas Denbigh hastened off without offering a word of explanation, merely saying, as he got into the carriage, that he would write to them when he had learned more of the particulars.

Lord Chestholm was sitting in the library at Thanet House, when the carriage which had been sent to the station to meet Mr. Denbigh drove up to the door. In another moment they were shaking hands, and at Tom Denbigh's request Lord Chestholm commenced his story at once.

"Three days after you left a respectable-looking man called, and asked to see Mr. Denbigh. My valet, who happened to answer the bell, told him that you were from home. He then inquired if he could see any one who could communicate with you; then my valet came to me, and I asked the man in. Judge of my astonishment when he produced the copy of a will dated exactly three months later than that under which George Newcombe had inherited, leaving every penny, with the exception of a few legacies, to your son Leonard. Sir Jasper told the man—he has a witness to prove the truth of his statement—not to bring forward this new will until he had been dead six months. There is no explanation of this extraordinary whim unless it be in these letters," he observed, in conclusion, handing his listener two letters sealed with Sir Jasper's seal, and directed, one to George Newcombe, the other to Leonard Denbigh.

"I must telegraph at once to Leonard," said his father, after a short silence, and rising he rang the bell. "There," he added, handing a slip of paper on which he had hastily scrawled a few words to the servant who appeared in answer to the ring, "take that at once, please, John. Now I must write to Cora."

(Continued on page 162.)

A PLAIN GIRL.

—30—

CHAPTER V.

THE drawing-room we entered was not the Tartan one of which Doozie had boasted, but a more ordinary, and certainly a far more elegant apartment. On the rug stood Mr. Maxwell—a veritable Scotchman—with high cheek-bones, a long upper lip and grey whiskers, meeting under his chin in a fringe, with a benevolent pleasant face, with a shrewd gray eye (blind to his daughter's follies), and he accorded her a most hearty welcome, no doubt because I was the friend and guest of his pearl, his pet, his youngest born—in short, his "Doozie."

A young man, with a very mixed complexion, snatched up to her and kissed her condescendingly, and gave me three fingers.

This was of course Colin. The other two gentlemen were standing half surrounded by three ladies in full evening dress, and bandying words and witticisms among them, judging by the shrill peals of laughter and masculine gruff "haws-haws."

"Oh, here are two more of us," said Aunt Flo, as they turned round and beheld us—"Doozie and Nellie"—but with a shrill peacock laugh, you need not notice them, as they are not out."

Very discouraging introduction. Doozie said—"How do you do?" and to her aunt, "What nonsense, Flo. I'm seventeen, and so is Nellie," whilst I made no sign whatever, but became of a brilliant hue, and presently fell back on old Mr. Maxwell, our recent journey, and the weather.

Mr. Maxwell took me into dinner—a splendid repast. I had never, never dined in state before, never been waited on by two footmen, never had choice of two cups and two fish; but Mr. Maxwell did prose—he weighed not merely his words, but his syllables. He began a story as we sat down, and we had not reached the point even at cheese.

Of course I resumed an air of respectful attention, and threw in "yes and no," and "indeed" and "really" at discretion, but my eyes and my thoughts wandered, and I ventured various looks across the table and around me. There was Colin, gobbling his dinner. He was almost bald, and certainly plain, but had a young face, and wore unimpeachable clothes.

There was Flo, Jessie and Bobbie in very smart evening dresses, talking much and eating little.

There was one man, name unknown, with good features and a superb moustache—but, alas! fat—discouraging to Flo and Jessie on either side, and seemingly quite equal to the strain, and to eating his dinner too, and here was the bear (presumably) and Bobbie.

"Oh, dear me! The truth must be told. I admired the bear immensely the moment I saw him, and never even to myself called him the bear any time, but by his proper name, Captain Karalske."

He was dark, and not very young (to me). I suppose really he was eight-and-twenty or thirty. He had aquiline features—very dark brown hair, a very dark moustache, and eyes to correspond. I cannot describe the *tout ensemble*, but it was that of the handsomest man I had ever seen.

I had seen, as you may imagine, but few. I stared at him doubtless, for he looked straight at me, and I coloured a guilty red—his look betokened polite indifference.

Oh! if I had only been pretty it would have been more than that. I felt a kind of fancy—a foolish fancy—that my unfortunate face had not merited a more than passing swift, careless glance.

Oh! that I were pretty! Then he would have looked again—have come and been introduced—after dinner have talked to me. I was but seventeen, please remember, and this was my first party, dinner or otherwise.

I glanced at Bobbie. She was talking away just as steadily as if she were reading a novel, and she was saying funny things too, for now

and then Captain Karslake's grave face relaxed, and he showed his teeth with a kind of laugh, and smiled with his eyes. What were they talking about? I let Mr. Maxwell's story go to the winds and strained my ears, and this is all that rewarded them.

"The whisky stories are great up here, at the expense of the Scotch," said Bobbie. "Have you heard the one about a man who went home fearfully tipsy, and people went to look for him, and found him lying by the seashore and the tide actually coming in over him up to his mouth, and he was feebly saying in a maudlin tone, 'Not another drop, hot or cold!'"

A low "haw-haw!" was her companion's response.

How I wished that I could tell stories too; but I had to fall back reluctantly on my own story-teller and his visit once upon a time to the Lakes of Killarney. Oh! it was a very, very dreary, long-drawn tale.

At last Aunt Flo gave the signal of my release, and we five ladies trooped away to the drawing-room, and some sat on the rug there and nursed their knees, and some sat on chairs, but all talked.

"Well," cried Bobbie, during a pause, "what do you think of them?"

"Oh, Orr is far and away the best—heaps to say for himself—capital fun," said Aunt Flo. "As to the other, he is good-looking enough, but not an idea in his head, I should say."

"Heaps," shrieked Bobbie. "He is delicious—he is charming—such a gentleman! He is quite refreshing, one of the old school, quite—never contradicts me or interrupts—plenty to say when I give him a chance, and as you can all see, frightfully good looking."

"And well aware of the fact," put in Jessie "No, give me Orr."

"Yes, you may have him with pleasure," said her sister, smartly.

Whereat Flo gave a long, loud peacock's laugh.

"He asked who you were, Nellie," said Bobbie, "and I said a school-girl, a friend of Doozie's; and what do you think he said—shall I tell you?"

"Oh, do!" I replied, quivering to know. "He said you looked it—meaning a school-girl—all over," she replied, with condescending smiles.

And I began to think that Bobbie was not at all as nice a girl as I had at first imagined.

"He said you looked afraid of your own shadow," she added, emphatically. "I told him it was all shyness, that you had been boxed up at school all your life, but you would soon improve under our care."

Afraid of my own shadow, that I was not; but the sudden change from Madame's routine, or from the quiet retirement of grandmamma's morning room, was so abrupt that it was not to be wondered at if I had looked subdued and startled. I had never been, as it were, "loose" in society in my life. Standing on my own pedestal I had hitherto posed as one of Madame's young ladies en masse, and was not responsible for my own individuality.

As I now sat and listened to the clatter of four tongues round me and saw that even Doozie was completely at her ease, and grown up for the time being, and was loudly declaring that she would go to the county hall, out or not out, and was determined to make the very most of her holidays, it occurred to me that I was foolish to sit there stiff, constrained and silent. Why not enjoy myself, too, like my neighbours? Why not cast off the prim manners I had brought with me from Richmond, and do as others did?

"Well, old-head-on-young-shoulders," said Jessie, giving me a thump on the back, "what are you thinking of? You are looking serious. Are you shocked at us all, you unsophisticated, childish school-girl?"

"Not she," replied Doozie; "she is ready for anything, only she has still the fear of Madame before her eyes. She has more go in her little finger than you have in your whole body once she is started, only she is just a little less bit shy among you all. You'll soon show them that you

are not afraid of your own shadow, won't you, Nell?"

Before I had time to answer the door opened, and the men, after their usual manner, slouched slowly in, and met with (Captains Orr and Karslake) a very hearty welcome from Bobbie and Jessie, whilst I fell a prey to Colin.

Colin and I got on pretty well, considering that he was the first young man I had ever spoken to; and as I threw off my first shyness, assuring myself that he could not eat me, and found my tongue and my courage, after a time I banded words, and sharp answers, and *repartees* with him with just as much ease as if he was one of the girls in my own class.

Colin, I could see was amazed, was amused—oh! triumph—actually ceased to lounge in the corner of the sofa, and sat up, all animation. We exchanged stories, we exchanged riddles, and the sound of his loud guffaws now constantly rang through the room, causing the other couples to look over at us with glances of astonishment and envy. I was quite determined that Captain Karslake should not have it in his power to say that I looked "afraid of my own shadow."

I noticed him sending more than one glance in our direction as he sat nursing his leg and listening to Bobbie's most beguiling conversation.

"What would he think of me now?" I said to myself. "What was this to me, and why should I be so anxious that he should think of me at all?"

I cannot say. I can only declare that I thought a good deal of him as I sat over my fire brushing out my too luxuriant locks.

I had not fallen in love with him at first sight across the table—no one is to run away with that idea—but he was positively the first handsome man I had ever met with or seen close; and I could not help wishing that he had taken me into dinner, that he had spoken to me, that he had not called me "a school-girl." However, I would soon show him, and everyone, that I was an emancipated young lady. Whatever the others did (and they went far), I would do too, and, possibly, improve upon.

"What a sly puss you are, Miss Still Waters," said Bobbie, embracing me next morning on the stairs.

"I thought you could not say boo to a goose. And how you did flirt with Colin; I never did see anything like it. Don't think of falling in love with him, my sweet child; he would be a horrid husband; he is a selfish beast. I know him well."

"I'm not going to fall in love with anyone ever," I replied, with great emphasis, "but I intend to flirt; it's capital fun."

"So it is; but don't be rash at the first go off, or you may burn your little fingers," she returned, giving me a squeeze as she spoke.

"Oh! Captain Karslake, I did not know that you were behind us; these stair-carpetts are so thick. I hope you have not heard us say anything that we ought not to have said. Now, have you?"

"I am not bound to commit myself," he said, smiling; "but you may rest assured that whatever I have overheard is secret; you and Miss—Nellie may rest at ease on that score."

There was to be a "big shoot" that day, but a pouring wet morning drove the men and beaters home, and after luncheon several lady visitors provisionally invited to afternoon tea dropped in from a covered omnibus—kindred spirits—and the fun became both fast and furious; the room was cleared, and we danced.

After this we played post, then blind man's buff, and here I was most thoroughly in my element, and, indeed, romped, and ran, and dodged, and drove, and screamed, and laughed just as I did at school.

Everyone entered into the spirit of the thing, except, perhaps, old Mr. Maxwell and Captain Karslake. The latter I am sure dissembled his feelings, and played to oblige—and hated it. Certainly Bobbie and Jessie were rather free and easy; they pulled his hair when he was blind man—pinched him, and in one stand-up struggle tore the whole pocket out of his coat, and broke his watch chain.

Positively when the first gong sounded, and a truce was proclaimed, we all looked as if we had been into action—with red faces, tousled hair—mine was, of course, all down—torn dresses, and ragged laces. However, I had enjoyed myself immensely, and never once been caught. A large party sat down to dinner (outsiders, those who had stayed all the afternoon), and as the champagne circulated the fun, and stories, and wit, such as it was, did likewise. I had had a "success" at the blind man's buff—I had been so active and so nimble, and my pert, saucy answers were received with roars of laughter.

I really began to feel very much elated, and to believe that, in spite of grandmamma, I was fated to shine in society after all! I really began after the first day or two to cut Bobbie out on her own ground—not with regard to her bear, for he did not like me, nor any of us. I felt this, I could not say why. The only thing that held him fast at Glenmore was the shooting, and that was magnificent.

His friend, Captain Orr, informed me that Karslake was a capital fellow among men, but he did not care for ladies, "but that he would stand a good deal, as long as he could have his fill of shooting."

This was not at all a polite speech, but in our free-and-easy *salon* there was no politeness going. The men lolled about and expected us to attend on them. No one ever showed us any courtesy excepting Captain Karslake, who did not approve of us—of me, especially. I saw it in his eye, and I laughed in his face, and became still more reckless.

How black he had looked when he came upon Colin and me in the little drawing-room—Colin standing with his mouth wide open as any shark's, and I, at the yard's distance, aiming chocolate creams at that capacious feature, making capital shots, too, amidst general applause.

"Will you have a chocolate, Captain Karslake?" I asked, as he stood in the doorway. "Here, catch!" aiming one straight at his nose, which, however, he fielded neatly in his left hand and, with a very stiff inclination for his thanks, he came and sat down among the audience.

But somehow knowing that he was there unnerved me; my shots did not go home as heretofore, when I was sure that he was sneering at me in his sleeve, so presently I gave up, and a regular battle royal of sweetmeats took place all round—a *mêlée* in which every one joined indiscriminately, using sofa cushions as shields, and conducting themselves more like inmates of Colney Hatch than anything else.

There had been two balls in the neighbourhood (one of them at the Nortons). Doozie and I did not go, but we heard full details, of course, from Jessie and Bobbie, and were as much surprised and disgusted as they had been themselves to hear, that—for him—the bear, had paid quite "marked attention" to Lily Norton, and had been openly chaffed about her *en route* home and taken it in bad part—a sign that it was serious.

"She's just the style he is sure to admire," said Jessie. "Very fair, and by no way of being delicate, and feminine and fragile, he should just see her appetite. And he does not know what a snake in the grass she is, and how she can flirt even with married men."

"I believe he is quite spoony on her—thinks her a refreshing contrast to all of us. By the way (to me), Nellie, you are his special horror—you are such a tomboy, so reckless, so I don't know what. Anyhow, he thinks you an awful girl. I got that out of Captain Orr."

At this I laughed, and said,—

"I did not care a brass button for Captain Karslake; but all the same I did not like to be told this, and added, 'But Captain Orr was a sneak to peech, and I shall take care to tell him so.'"

"For goodness sake, don't. I wrung it from him—bothered and bothered, and gave him no peace. I wanted to hear the bear's opinion of us all, but could get no further. Of course we are all in the same boat, and I told Captain Orr to tell him if he liked, that we thought him a stuck-up prig and a beast, and could not bear the sight of him."

"Oh, Jessie, I say!" cried Aunt Flo, "that was too bad. However, your papa likes him, and so does old Fraser, the keeper. He is such a shot; but mercy on us, he is slow, and he takes everything in earnest. I hear he was mad at our putting flour among his dress clothes, and putting his boots in water."

"So much the better. Anyway, he is off the day after to-morrow—after the ball—and I dare say he won't be in a hurry to come back again," I cried—I, who in the short ten days had burst, as it were, from a grub into a very fast young butterfly, and really scarcely knew myself at times, so completely had I been carried away by my own high spirits, my seventeen years, and the potent force of example.

CHAPTER VI.

It was to be the last big beat of the season, and we four ladies were invited to come out, and bring, or rather, escort the lunch.

Outdoor amusements were not much in the Misses Maxwell's line; however they started punctually for a certain cairn, got up in corduroy skirts, shooting jackets and Glen gairies, and looking as much like young men as lay in their power.

Doolee and I had no costumes of the kind. A tweed jacket and a dark serge shirt and a sailor hat, with a blue handkerchief twisted round it, was the nearest thing that I could do to resemble them. We met the shooting party. Luncheon was discussed, sport had been fair, and the men were cheerful.

After lunch old Mr. Maxwell took me under his care. I went on his beat and astonished him by my walking powers, and my agility in leaping, climbing and scrambling. My tomboy tastes stood me in good stead now.

We had Captain Karalake on our line, but we took good care that we did not see much of him. There was no doubt that he much preferred my room to my company; and, indeed, considering the rude things I had said to him across the table cloth at luncheon—my anger and my tongue both whetted by the stinging recollection of his having called me "an awful girl"—no one need wonder at his giving me an uncommonly wide berth for the remainder of the afternoon.

I noticed that he was a capital shot, and as quick and active as the best gillie among them, though his foot did not happen to be upon his native heather.

It was getting chilly and late, or rather the sun was setting, and a thin, milk-white mist was rising, that threw a kind of veil over the whole moor.

I had been scrambling along beside my host for some time in silence, and when I did speak there was no answer. I had thought we were within a few yards of one another when the mist came and the sound of rolling pebbles, as I clambered up a kind of gravel mound, I had taken for his rough shooting boots coming after me.

I stood for some time almost ashamed to call out. This seems astonishing, but it was a fact—and then hearing a distant shot (probably a gun being let off before they went home), I raised my voice and emitted a feeble treble, quavering cry. No answer. I tried again; a yet more discordant shriek, that might perhaps be taken for a night-bird or a belated crow.

Then I began hastily to descend the hill in the direction from which I had heard the shot fired. It was not merely foggy now, it was actually dark, and a nasty, wetting drizzle had come on, to make matters still more unpleasant—if that were possible. I plunged along over tussocks, over stones, over rocks, into pools of water, becoming every moment more wretched and more bewildered; and stopping now and then to give a kind of scream.

Supposing I were to ramble about like this all night! supposing I fell into a loch or down a precipice! I was already pretty well worn out; my clothes wet and draggled and torn, my hair, as usual, loose and dishevelled (too much hair is really quite unmanageable as those who will have it will testify) so I sat myself down on what felt

like a large, flat stone, and, giving myself up for lost, commenced to keep the rain in countenance by shedding showers of tears.

It is not at all a pleasant sensation to be sitting alone and forlorn, and tired and soaking wet, in the middle of a strange, black, unknown country, knowing that one's companions are all just sitting down to a capital dinner in a warm comfortable room, clothed in nice, dry clothes, and the best of high spirits.

I sat there, it seemed to me, for fully two hours, and I was now not merely wet, but perfectly stiff with cold, when at last my ear caught a sound of quick footsteps ascending some ground just above me. Now was my time or never, and I stood up and screamed—screamed—

"Help! help!" in a key that resembled a steam whistle, I am sure.

A hearty "Hullo!" responded, and the steps came hastening towards me, and a man's voice cried out, cheerfully,—

"In that you, Miss Dennis!"

"Yes, it's me," I cried, in a miserable tone. "I have been lost for ages."

All the boldness and sauciness was gone out of my speech now, though I knew by his voice that my discoverer was Captain Karalake. He came up and struck a match, held it in the hollow of his hand, and looked at me keenly. Truly I was a pretty spectacle with my wet garments, wet hair, and tear-stained face.

"I wanted to make sure," he said, throwing the match away, "in case you might be playing me some trick."

"Trick! I only wish I was," I cried, indignantly. "I've been rambling about all in the dark for hours, and gave myself up for lost."

"It's well I came back. I thought I heard a cry," he returned. "Mr. Maxwell declared that you had joined the others, but I was not so sure of that, and I thought I'd come back on chance, though he was very positive."

"It was awfully good of you"—now walking on beside him—"and far more than I deserved," I added, overcome by a sense of burning coals upon my head. "Only for you I'd—probably have been frozen to death," beginning to weep once more at the mere recollection of my miseries.

"Oh, not you. They would have missed you, and sent a party; but you have managed to get over a lot of ground since I last saw you. I never expected to find you, and began to think the old gentleman was right. When I heard a queer kind of voice from the valley I could not make out whether it was from you or the hooting of an owl."

Was he now paying me out for my many rude speeches?

"So I came on, and then you were—"

"Is it far—I mean home?" I asked, as I struggled along beside him.

"About five miles. There is a kind of shanty or cottage about a mile and a half away, where you might rest and dry your clothes, and perhaps we could get a pony to take you on."

"You seem to know the moor well," I said, admiringly.

"Yes, I do. I was shooting here two years ago, when it was rented by friends of mine, and that's how—"

I'm sure he was going to add, "I was so ready to come again;" but he stopped and said,—

"I know every perch of it, and I hope you will find me a safe guide."

The words were hardly out of his mouth before I tripped up over a big root of heather, and would have measured my length then and there only he caught me in time, saying,—

"You had better take my hand, or my arm, Miss Dennis, and I'll get you along all right. We will bury the hatchet—for this occasion only—if you like."

I grasped his offered hand convulsively. How warm and strong it felt in comparison to my own, cold, limp member—and telling myself what a wretch I had been ever to pretend I did not like my present escort, I clung to him as tenaciously as any octopus, for I was tired, humbled, hungry, and frightened.

How much nicer he was than I could have believed possible! There was encouragement in his very voice.

How, ten times better, that he should be helping me back over this dark, wet wilderness, than any of those carpet knights who shone best in Maxwell's drawing room, winding silk or singing love songs.

Captain Karalake neither wound silk nor sang; he generally talked sport with our host, or took a reluctant hand at poker or nap; but oh! what a far, far more cheerful and braver and trustworthy companion than Colin or Captain Orr in a strait like the present!

How he helped me, I may say lifted me, over burns, led me through gaps, and handed me over broken stone walls as if I were a mere child in arms! and I—I was now so tired as to know neither surprise or gratitude, only an intense desire to lie down and rest.

At last a twinkling light came in view, and we were not long in reaching it—a cottage standing near the edge of the moor, and occupied by an old woman who sat spinning at the fire, or rather, in the high nook, and who was nearer to my idea of a "witch" than anything I had ever seen in all my life! Firstly, she was very old; secondly, she was very cross; thirdly, her eyes were as bright and sharp as diamonds; fourthly, she stooped, and her face was seamed with wrinkles.

"What may you be wanting?" was her first query as we entered after long waiting.

"We have lost our way on the moor, and this young lady wishes to dry her clothes and rest, if you will give her house room."

"Come in (ben) then," walking or hobbling back to her wheel. "Dry yourselves; I'll no hinder yee!"

At this ungracious invitation Captain Karalake drew up a stool for me in the front of the fire, removed my limp and battered hat, and helped me off with my wet jacket.

"You'll be strangers!" said the witch.

"Yes."

"Aye, and English too you are; your tongue tells me. How came you on the moor?"

"A shooting party from Glenmore. We are staying there."

"Oh, aye, so that will be it! There's a house full there—a rare queer, cracked, and lot. No good! And Maxwell has heaps o' silver, but no sense. His father was a poor bit cotten, no better than mine; but money makes the man. Aye, the lady is perished," looking at my blue fingers and wet hair. "You bide here, air, an' I'll give her some dry clothes, and put her to the fire. My granddaughter has some bits of things here will fit for a wee while. You come with me," hobbling, candle in hand, to an inner room. Oh! but it smelt of peat.

Soon my damp petticoats were replaced by a stout woollen garment and worsted stockings, and I came back to the kitchen in a striped petticoat made too short, and a blue kind of bagdoun, and with my hair loosened to dry, and Kitty's Sunday shoes on my feet.

I sat sideways to the fire and dried my long hair, which swept the floor, and felt warmer and happier, and altogether better.

I was a selfish wretch, for hitherto I had never thought of my deliverer, who, of course, was wet too; but he declared that his clothes were rough and thick, and there was no fear of him.

"And as to my hair," taking off his cap and rubbing his hand over his short locks, "there's not much of that," with a smile at my mermaid's locks.

"Did you ever see the like o' it," said the witch, looking at me. "It beats a' I ever saw. You're no a bonnie lassie, but you ha' bonnie auncies and bonnie hair, and now I'll refuse you a cup o' tea. It will warm ye up in no time, and maybe he," looking at my companion, "would be all the better o' a wee drapple o' whiskey."

But this he declined, asking instead permission to smoke, and ultimately sharing my tea—strong and hot, and most welcome.

Who would think, looking at us thus, hobnobbing over this old woman's peat fire, that we



I RAISED MY VOICE AND EMITTED A FEW TREBLE, QUAYKING CRY.

were in genteel life at daggers drawn! No one.

"Any one but me might take you two for sweethearts," said the witch, quite suddenly; "but I know better."

I blushed scarlet.

"You're no great friends even; but you will be near enough some day."

"I see you can tell fortunes," said my companion, readily turning the very personal drift of the conversation into another channel. "Suppose you tell me mine. Will you?" half offering his hand.

"Oh, aye!" pushing aside her wheel. "I'll do that ready enough," taking it between her claw-like talons. "You're a bonnie gentleman, and a real gentleman, of good old stock; aye, and a brave gentleman. You've done some fighting, I see, in your day, and will do more," holding the palm of his hand close up to the candle as she spoke, while he stood up and towered above her, and I looked on amazed and breathless.

"There's a great surprise and disappointment in store for you soon; but it will turn out better than you think. You are in love with a girl with blue eyes and fair hair."

Here Captain Karalake became of deep brown kind of tan-colour, which did duty for a blush.

"Aye, you're main in love with a bonnie lassie whom you'll never marry, and you'll marry another lassie whom you don't love, and one who has neither siller nor beauty, but will have both. There's a fine riddle for you. After that there will be troubles—aye, many, many troubles; but not too bad, and in the end you will win through them all, and live long and die happy," suddenly dropping his hand and looking over at me. "Now, lassie, for yours. Come, let me see it—never be frightened; if there's anything very ill I keep it from you. Aye," nodding her head, "it's a queer little hand—a contrary one. You'll marry one you care for, but who does not care for you, that's plain. You will see strange things—you will find out a

great mistake, it may be more—your first child will die; but you will live long, and forget all you have gone through. Aye, there's trouble in store for you; but the line of heart and life are long. It will come right in the end."

So saying she dropped my hand too, and sat looking into the fire, as if she saw something there.

"Permit me, good mother, to cross your hand with gold," said Captain Karalake, rousing her from her reverie, "and to ask if there is any way—any donkey or pony or cart that would take this young lady back to Glenmore to-night?"

"Donkey! Nay; but there's a Sheltie pony in the brye, and if you lead him he may go kind; but he is a queer, contrary beastie—he's my son's—and you will have to hold the young lady on; there's no saddle, man or woman's!"

"No doubt we can manage; and as it is half-past eight, I think we ought to make a start," looking at me. "I daresay you thought it was late, but you know it gets dark at five o'clock. So if your own things are dry we might be setting off, and I'll go and look up the pony."

So he did. By the time that I had twisted up my hair and resumed my still somewhat damp dress, hat, and jacket, and the outward appearance of a young lady, and not a cotter lassie, the animal—the beastie—was at the door waiting me, with anything but eagerness in its appearance—a shaggy white highland pony, with a sulky eye, and rope reins.

However, anything was better than walking; any port in a storm.

I had not much difficulty in getting on the "beastie's" broad back—and promising to return him safely the next morning, with farewells and thanks and good-speeds from the witch, we slowly left the door.

It was still three miles to Glenmore. The pony had rough pace, and road was bad.

There was no moon, only a few blinking stars.

We could just see our way, no more, and it was very hard indeed for me to keep my balance on

the Sheltie's back. I slid, and slid and recovered, and then slid down again.

Finally Captain Karalake—and it seemed the most natural thing in the world, and neither improper or familiar—kept me firmly in my place by placing his arm round my waist.

And in this affectionate attitude did we two sworn foes arrive at last at the thrice welcome door of Glenmore Castle.

(To be continued.)

In the Burmese village every house contains a loom, and on these are woven the really beautiful stuffs worn by the natives. Some of these materials are damasks of complicated patterns. The mystery of the "cards" and the Jacquard loom has never penetrated these primitive regions, and close-patterned damasks of varied and brilliant colours were produced by the weaver's passing to and fro through the warp threads tiny shuttles carrying weft. So many as one hundred shuttles are used on a silk damask twenty-four inches wide. There are few prettier examples of village and hand industries than seeing women and girls, gayly clad and chatting merrily, sit skeining and winding bright-coloured silks under the palms and papayas of the woodland lanes of Amarapura, or busy at the loom, weaving with deft fingers, by means of a hundred shuttles, under the shade of bamboo shelters set against the plaited walls of toy-like houses. Work as hard as they may, the earnings of these willing and clever workers are but two annas a day—that is, less than twopence. Many months go by before an elaborate damask tunic is finished. On the palleys of the loom may be often seen little bronze figures of gnats or fairies, placed there to win the good offices of the guardian spirit, for, firm as may be the belief of the Burman in pure Buddhism, he has not shaken off the older belief in spirits, fairies, and angels, good or bad.



ENNELOPE WAS BREATHLESSLY LISTENING TO THE SOUND OF MUFFLED FOOTSTEPS WHICH CAME NEARER, NEARER.

TRAGEDY AT ROSE COTTAGE.

CHAPTER XXII.

It was on a Monday that the Hillington Bench of Magistrates heard Phillis Marston's story and granted the warrant for Dr. Bertram's arrest. Mr. Carston was the only "J.P." absent; and his confrères were of an unanimous opinion, after listening to Miss Marston's evidence, that the plausible stranger who had come among them first as Mrs. Rivers's medical attendant was "the man with the grey beard," and the destroyer of the poor girl, known to them as Mrs. Ashlyn.

"I should say we could not fail to prove the case against him," said the Earl to Colonel Austruther, a great favourite of his; "a friend of mine was extremely intimate with Professor Varinski, and will be able to identify Bertram as the Professor. The case seems as clear as daylight."

But the Colonel shook his head.

"Dr. Bertram is too cunning a fox to be run to ground easily; and, remember, he has the command of almost untold wealth. His wife's income has been accumulating for years, and you may be sure that, though her's in name, he has full command of it."

"But you don't doubt his guilt?"

"Not his guilt, but our ability to prove it! How are we to prove Bertram was married to Miss Marston's sister? If we can't prove the marriage, his object in wishing her removed is destroyed."

Two constables had started for Bankside, and though by now it was long past lunch time the magistrates still lingered at the Court House; not one of them wished to be absent when their prisoner arrived.

Of course he would be captured; no one in Hillington had had warning of what was to happen. Dr. Bertram would be caught easily, like a rat in a hole!

Would he? The constables felt quite as cock

sure of success as their superiors; and the superior, who was in plain clothes, gave a resounding knock at the front entrance to Bankside as though much impressed by the importance of his errand.

It was opened by a stranger. Since her second marriage Mrs. Bertram had changed all her servants. The new butler was a Londoner, and had no acquaintances in Hillington, so he had no idea of the visitor's identity, and decided he had no business to come to the front entrance.

"I wish to see Dr. Bertram."

"Not at home!" replied the butler, succinctly.

"When will he be in?"

"Can't say!"

"Look here, young man!" said the ambassador of the law, losing his temper. "You'd better keep a civil tongue in your head. I've most important business with your master, and I shall stay here until he returns."

Mr. Scott accordingly seated himself in one of the big oak chairs in the hall. He looked as if he meant to be as good as his word.

John grinned from ear to ear.

"Stay, here, matey!" he cried, cheerfully. "Would you like to send home for your traps? A night shirt and a collar or two might not come amiss!"

"Confound your insolence! What do you mean?"

"Dr. Bertram objects to swearing," said John, reprovingly, "unless he does it himself." This last as an aside.

"Cease your horse-play!" commanded the Inspector, "and answer plainly. Where is Dr. Bertram?"

"Well," said John, who enjoyed his triumph over the stranger accordingly, "I couldn't tell you for certain, but he's somewhere on the sea!"

"What?"

John chuckled.

"The master left last night by the mail train for London. I heard him tell the mistresses they should cross by the twelve o'clock boat. It's

past two now, so I conclude they're on the sea!"

"Confound it! why didn't you say so before?"

"You never gave me the chance!"

"Look here, young man! It's no use mincing the matter, I am here on very disagreeable business."

John chuckled.

"Sheriff's officer—eh? I guessed as much. I reckon Dr. Bertram must have had a sight of bills on his mind before he was driven to marry a lady old enough to be his mother! Well, you needn't be uneasy; the missis has plenty of coin, and she'll come down handsome!"

"Young man, you are quite mistaken," said Inspector Scott, fiercely. "I want to arrest Dr. Bertram on the charge of murder! If he is innocent, he'll prove it, and be acquitted; if he's guilty, the wealth of the mines of Golconda won't save him! It's a hanging case if ever there was yet."

The butler started. He grew suddenly grave; all the audacity and freedom had died out of his manner. No one knows better than a really superior servant that a charge of crime shadows a man's name for years, even if he can prove his innocence.

"I wonder if that had anything to do with it," he said, rubbing his hands thoughtfully together. "I said last night it was a rum start going off like that on a Sunday evening, at an hour's notice."

"You had better tell me all you know," said Mr. Scott, affably, "it will be none the worse for you!"

"You're welcome," returned John, "Miss Rivers left here on Friday. The master and a nurse went with her, and he came back at night alone. He told his wife she had borne the journey well, and that in a week or two they would go and see her. On Saturday, I am positive, he had no thought of leaving home, for he promised Mr. Carston, of the Hall, to dine with him on Thursday. I was in the room and heard the

invitation given. Sunday he went for a long walk. He came back in a temper, and told Mrs. Bertram he'd changed his mind, and they'd be off to London by the evening mail train. He wouldn't let her take many things, saying the less luggage they had the better, and as to her maid going with them, he wouldn't hear of such a thing.

"The mistress is a lady that likes her own way, and she tried her best to get it, but it was of no manner of use. She had three boxes packed, but he'd only let one go with her, and as to himself, he'd nothing but a small Gladstone. She was fretful and hurried, but he seemed as cool as a cucumber. He left me twenty pounds for the ordinary household expenses, and told me to apply to his lawyer if I wanted more before his return. I asked if he'd send an address for me to forward letters, but he said I need not send them on. He did not expect anything of importance."

Scott and the butler exchanged glances of keen scrutiny.

"That's all I can say," remarked the butler, "and I must own I don't like the look of things. I haven't been here long. I came with the best of characters, and if Dr. Bertram really has got himself into trouble, having lived with him, will go against me in the future."

"Not it," said the Inspector, reassuringly, "there's something attractive in a murder case, and people always run after anyone mixed up in it."

"I ain't mixed up in it," said the butler, angrily. "Why, I don't know even now whom you fancy the master murdered."

"You have heard of the tragedy at Rose Cottage?"

"Rather! It was the first thing people told me. Do you mean he's in that?"

Mr. Scott nodded.

After a few minutes' consideration he decided to return and tell the magistrates all he had gleaned.

It was just possible they might order him to search the house. Something of this he hinted to the butler.

"You won't find anything suspicious here," said John. "When Miss Rivers was here some of us thought that the house was haunted, we used to hear such a strange wailing near her rooms; but there's not been a sound there since she went. It's a sad thing about her, isn't it?"

"What do you mean! It's sad, of course, that she should be under the control of a stepfather she detests; but now, Bertram is suspected of murder, it will be easy for her friends to interfere and rescue her."

"They had better have interfered before," said John, "don't you know what's happened to her?"

"You told me just now that she had gone to London with a professional nurse."

John lowered his voice.

"She's quite mad, poor young lady. They've taken her to London to put her in an asylum."

"Nonsense!"

"It's perfectly true."

"You can't have seen the young lady."

"I have seen her lots of times. I don't mean that she was violent or dangerous. Her madness took the form of melancholia. She would not speak at all. She just sat with folded hands all day long. She never answered if they tried to talk to her. She never seemed to hear them, and now and then the tears would fall down her poor white cheeks till it made one's heart ache to see her."

"Who told you that she was mad?"

"Dr. Bertram, when I first came. He said I must not be alarmed at anything Miss Rivers did or said as she was hopelessly insane."

Mr. Scott got back to the Court House as best he could, and made his report to Lord Hillington in a few words.

"We're too late, my lord, the doctor got wind of his danger and went off by the mail train last night. He took his wife with him."

"And Miss Rivers?"

"No, my lord. It's a burning shame, but the butler told me she is in a madhouse."

"What!" Lord Hillington's voice was full of mingled horror and dismay. "Scott! do you know what you are saying!"

"Yes, my lord," said the Inspector, gravely, "it's a bad business."

There was a hurried consultation between the magistrates, and it was decided that in Bertram's absence they were justified in issuing a search warrant for Bankside to be examined, to see if anything could be found there bearing upon the case.

"If only my son were here!" groaned the Earl. "Geoffrey has a clearer head than mine, and he would know our best course to take to discover that poor child."

"If you mean Miss Rivers," said Colonel Anstruther, very gravely, "I am sure that our best step is to get Bertram, alias Varinski, into our keeping. When he finds himself brought to bay, he may be only too thankful to tell us where his stepdaughter is."

"But, meanwhile," said the Earl, speaking with strong emotion, "think of that girl, as sane as you or I, shut up among mad people; it is terrible!"

"I would far rather think of her as in a well-managed lunatic asylum, than in the keeping of her stepfather," said the Colonel, quietly. "Doctors are honest men, Lord Hillington; and when convinced of Miss Rivers's sanity, the one who attends her is sure to order her release."

"Bertram is also a doctor," said the Earl, sharply.

"Not he! I never had much faith in Mrs. Rivers's *protégé*, and one day I discussed one or two medical subjects with him (my father was a physician, and I know a good deal about the profession,) bless me! he soon convinced me he was a charlatan!"

Colonel Anstruther accompanied the police on their visit of inspection to Bankside; none of the other magistrates volunteered for this duty, and yet all felt that the constables' somewhat rural minds should be reinforced by a keener intellect.

The Colonel was a man of many sides. A first-rate soldier, he had a great deal of general ability, and knew how to extract information without seeming to press for it.

Under his questioning the servants soon remembered that the first nurse had come from an Institution, and been in all things very different to the second.

"She wore a uniform," admitted the butler; "but, lor, sir! she wasn't a bit like the other. Nurse Green had a way with her as though she were used to managing sick people and looking after them; but this other woman—why, she seemed scared when she was left alone with Miss Rivers. She was dressed like a nurse, but I'll wager she hadn't been as it long, for her hands were rough and chapped, just like a charwoman's. She'd done hard work, and plenty of it, I'll be bound!"

"Did not Mrs. Bertram think her a strange person for her daughter's attendant?"

"Yes; she complained once or twice that 'Nurse Margaret' did not treat her respectfully; but the doctor only laughed and said professional nurses thought themselves equal to anybody!"

"How did the nurse get on with him?"

"Uncommonly well, sir; they often had a good long chat when the mistress was out of the way. We all of said it wasn't the first time Dr. Bertram and the nurse had met by a long way. She was nothing much to look at and a good ten years' older than him. A dark, ugly, swarthy woman, with a foreign look about her, though she spoke English well enough, as Cockneys speak it."

Colonel Anstruther dismissed the subject of the nurse. He knew all he wanted now, and was certain the woman, far from being a trained attendant of the sick, was some creature whom Bertram had known in his past life and introduced into his home to further his cruel designs upon his stepdaughter.

They went everywhere; even into the private study, which John declared to be sacred to his master.

"If you'll believe me, sir, none of us ever go into that room, except the housemaid, once a week, to clean it. It's warmed by a stove which

she sets outside and he carries in himself. Even my mistress never comes near him here. She says he is writing a book, which is to make him famous; and he must not be disturbed."

"Has he had this room since the marriage, or before?"

"I believe he has had it ever since he came to Bankside; but I can't say, sir, being a stranger."

It was a handsomely-furnished room, of moderate size; two cupboards, in dark oak, filled the recesses on either side of the fireplace. The Inspector opened one with a skeleton key, and Colonel Anstruther drew a sigh of relief. There, in all its completeness, lay the "make-up" of an old man. The clothes suitable to the rôle, the venerable grey wig and long beard.

"Scott," said the Colonel, very gravely, "you were present at the inquest on Mrs. Ashlyn?"

"I was, sir."

"And you heard the evidence of the Rev. Paul Hardy, respecting the man with the grey beard?"

"I did, sir. There have been people who declared Mr. Hardy just imagined that story; but it was a great deal too plain and detailed to have been imagination. I have always felt that, sooner or later, we should find that man; and now it's pretty plain that it was Dr. Bertram masquerading in this disguise."

Anstruther was feeling in the pockets of the coat. He took out an envelope of somewhat bulky appearance, and a small bon-bon box.

"You'd better read it, sir, if there's a letter inside," said the Inspector, seeing the Colonel paused, "things are at that pass, I don't think anything would surprise me now."

And the envelope held two letters, the first was simply an impassioned request that Dr. Bertram would forward the enclosure to his friend, Mr. Ashlyn, without an hour's delay. The enclosure was the heart-broken appeal the poor girl at Rose Cottage had penned the night before her death.

Colonel Anstruther open the bon-bon box, it contained perhaps half a dozen sweetmeats of a most inviting looking aspect. Colonel Anstruther smelt one and then closed the box with a jerk.

The tragedy of that July day was getting plain to him now. No wonder the man with the grey beard was sought for far and wide in vain since he had been living openly in their midst as Dr. Bertram. No wonder that glass, bottle, or any other receptacle for poison had not been found at Rose Cottage after the tragedy. None had been used. Each of those attractive looking sweetmeats contained poison. Of course, the box and its contents would be forwarded to the county analyst, but to Anstruther his report was a foregone conclusion.

That night's post carried two letters from Lord Hillington's own hand. One was to Paul Hardy, bidding him to be of good cheer, for his innocence would soon be completely established. The other, to Robert Ormond, begging him to come down to Hillington as soon as possible.

"Of course you must stay with us," said the gentle Countess when Phillis Marston suggested she ought to return to Mayfield-road, and not trespass longer on the hospitality of the Castle.

"Why, my dear, it would be torture to you not to be on the spot and hear all our discoveries first hand; besides, how can you possibly give lessons on any subject while your mind is on the rack?"

Phillis burst into tears.

"When it is all settled," she said, sadly, "and I know that my Arline was murdered by her husband, I shall give up my daily teaching. I could not bear to live alone in the rooms we both called home. I should go over and over our last days together there till I was mad. A very kind friend of mine, who was once Arline's employer, has promised to try and find me a situation as resident governess, so you see it won't matter if I do lose my present pupils by staying here, only I do not like to impose on your kindness."

"Never say that," replied the Countess, "the Hardy family are such old friends of ours that we have felt the shadow on Paul's name almost as much as if it had fallen on our own. If through

your testimony, dear Miss Marston, that shadow is removed, we shall all have cause to bless you."

A cablegram reached the Castle from Lord Fane.

"Bad news from M. If possible go to Bankside and insist on seeing her. I sail for home to-morrow, and her aunt with me."

It was a costly message to flash across the submarine wires, but then Geoffrey Fane was not the sort to think of money where his life's love was concerned.

Robert Ormond reached the Castle and looked very grave when he heard why his presence there was needed.

"I think I shall have had a lesson against forming promiscuous acquaintances that will last my life. I assure you, Lord Hillington, I believed implicitly in Varinaki. You might have knocked me down with a feather when a Polish nobleman of whose rank there could be no question proved to me he was a vile impostor. I felt as if I should be ashamed to face the people I had introduced him to, but even then I never dreamed of anything like this."

"You are not so much to blame as Lady Darley," said Lord Hillington, gravely. "To my mind this poor girl's death is indirectly her fault."

"She was such a pretty little thing," said Bob, half wistfully. "Arlene Marston, I mean, just a bright little creature a man would like to pet and make much of. When her sister told me of her disappearance, I felt as if I had lost a dear little friend."

"You were not Varinaki's rival!"

"Oh dear no. I admired Arline very much; but I should want some one nobler and braver for my wife. I'm not a very grand character myself, Lord Hillington; but if ever I marry, I shall choose a girl with more soul and intellect than that poor little humming-bird possessed."

And from the great attention he bestowed on Molly Hardy in those sad and anxious days of waiting, it occurred to Lord Hillington that Bob Ormond had, perhaps, found his ideal in Paul's sister.

CHAPTER XXII

LORD FANE was an experienced traveller; he had visited most European countries, and thoroughly enjoyed journeying from place to place; but he set out to return to England with an aching heart.

He did not know what he feared or expected; he could not have put the nameless dread which possessed him into words; but an instinct told him some peril threatened the girl he loved, and his heart ached with anxiety respecting the fate of Meta Rivers.

Mrs. Barton proved herself a considerate and sympathetic companion. She was far graver than her friends had ever seen her; and the American acquaintances she met on board were much exercised at the change in her, and very curious as to the relationship which existed between her and the grave, careworn-looking young Englishman.

Years had taught Penelope wisdom; the crude, impulsive manner which had so annoyed Lady Hillington long ago, had all gone now; and Geoffrey Fane often wondered at the perfect tact his companion displayed.

When she had once made him understand that her anxiety about her niece almost equalled his own, she rarely mentioned the subject, but tried as much as possible to prevent his mind from brooding over Meta's fate; it was only when they were within a few hours of Liverpool that she spoke again of the poor girl's deferred letter.

"Lord Fane, before we land we ought to have decided on some plan of action. You telegraphed to your father before we sailed. Do you expect a letter from him to meet you? Shall you be guided by that as to your next step? For my part I think I had better travel straight to Bankside; and after expressing as much surprise as I can feign, that my sister-in-law should have married again, claim her hospitality for the present!"

"I believe myself that we shall find my father has come to meet us," said Geoffrey. "I know he would wish you to stay at the Castle; but since Mrs. Bertram has boycotted us, it might not do for you to go to her straight from our house."

"I shall go to Bankside!" said Mrs. Barton, firmly; "and frankly, Lord Fane, I hate my errand. I never liked my sister-in-law much in the past, and I have even less regard for her now!"

Lord Hillington was not among those who came off in a tender when the good ship entered the Mersey; so there was no need after all for Penelope to retire to her cabin and busy herself with packing. But all the same, someone had come to meet Geoffrey Fane—the very last person the young nobleman had expected.

"Hardy, my dear boy, this is a pleasant sight! I don't need to ask any questions. I can tell by your very face that you are cleared!"

"Hardly that, yet," said Paul, simply; "but, Geoff, I believe everyone at Hillington acquits me now in their hearts; for we have traced that poor girl's history, and her sister has a pretty clear suspicion who ended her life."

"The sister! Then you have found out who Mrs. Ashlyn was!"

"Yes; she is the sister of a young lady Molly and I met in Brittany this summer. We heard something of Miss Marston's story; how her sister had married secretly, and disappeared. But we neither of us connected the lost girl with Mrs. Ashlyn until quite recently."

"And then—"

Paul sighed.

"I saw her photograph; that of Miss Marston's sister, I mean; and it tallied with what I remembered of the face I had seen at Rose Cottage. I found the lost girl had disappeared the very day Mrs. Ashlyn came to Hillington; suspicion grew almost certain, and when Miss Marston had seen and identified the few memorials of the dead girl in the hands of the police, there was no missing clue."

"And—the man with the grey beard, has anyone discovered his identity? and was he, as we thought, the poor girl's husband?"

"Yes. He married her early in the year. He seems to have borne more than one alias."

"Paul, old boy!" cried Fane, struck by a reserve in the other's manner, "you are keeping something back! Tell me plainly, what is wrong?"

Paul Hardy sighed.

"The man is being sought for far and near; there's a warrant out for his arrest, and a reward offered for his apprehension. The proofs of his guilt are so plain there can be no doubt of the result of his trial. Why, even the 'grey beard' has been discovered among his clothes, and a box of poisoned sweetmeats from which the poor girl must have received the fatal poison."

"But you haven't told me the fellow's name, though you imply I know him."

"Geoffrey, the villain was known in Hillington as Louis Bertram, and if ever he is put on his trial, he will end on the gallows. Your father thought it would be a terrible shock to you on account of Miss Rivers."

Lord Fane shook his head.

"No sensible creature could blame Meta for her step-father's faults. To tell you the truth, Paul, I have such an unceasing dread of Bertram, I should be thankful to feel he was shut up at Portland, or somewhere, and so prevented from doing any more harm."

"He won't be shut up. It's a clear case of wilful murder."

Both the men shuddered.

"Poor Mrs. Bertram," breathed Geoff. "Heaven knows I have little cause to like her; but this must be a terrible experience for her. How does she bear up?"

"I don't know."

"What, has she not forgiven you yet?"

"Geoff, you accused me just now of keeping something back. It is just this, none of us know what has become of Mrs. Bertram, she left home more than a week ago with her husband, and nothing has been heard of her since."

"Then Meta is alone at Bankside; but no, I

am sure my mother would fetch her to the Castle."

And then Paul Hardy broke the truth to his old friend. These two had been comrades all their lives. Fane had stood by the curate in his darkest hour. Paul loved him as a brother, and it was no wonder his voice faltered at the news he had to tell.

Geoffrey Fane listened like a creature in a dream.

"They will kill her!" he cried, angrily, "she will be done to death by their cruelty. Oh! why do such monsters exist?"

But when Mrs. Barton joined them and heard the story, she took a different view of the case.

"No lunatic asylum would detain Meta long. To my mind she is safer even there than she could be with her mother. Now, Lord Fane, listen to my proposal. I mean to go and take up my abode at Bankside, and it will go hard with me if I do not discover some of the Bertrams' secrets there. Meanwhile, you must employ a detective; give him a full description of my niece and of the time of her disappearance, and depend upon it she will be found. Money can do a great deal in such a case."

"But Mrs. Bertram has plenty of money at her command."

"She never liked spending it," said Penelope, a little bitterly, "and now it would be well nigh impossible, for if she and her precious husband are really in hiding, she would not dare even to sign a cheque for fear of betraying her whereabouts."

Mrs. Barton and the two young men travelled to London together, then Paul left to return to Mayfield road, but not before he had had a few words in confidence with Mrs. Barton.

"I used to think Englishmen very cold and exclusive," she said, thoughtfully; "but I rather fancy Lord Fane is an exception. He has taken the love fever badly."

"Very badly. I quite dreaded the effect of my news upon him."

"He mustn't despond," said Mrs. Barton, briskly; "try and make him see that Meta must be found before long, it's only a question of waiting."

Lord and Lady Hillington were both at the small country station. The mother was entirely occupied with her son, and so Penelope's first interview with the Earl was almost *de-die*.

How she had loved him once! How she had longed for him to love her back again; that was all over long ago. She had been a wild impulsive girl in the days when she thought her old play-mate a hero; but just because of that far-off time she was glad to see what a fine honest-looking outspoken English gentleman her old love was, there was no shame to any woman for admiring such a man as the twelfth Earl of Hillington, for he deserved both love and trust.

"You are very much altered," he said to her.

She smiled, and for a moment the smile recalled the bright unconventional hoyden of other days.

"I have had a great deal of trouble," she answered, quietly, "and nothing changes a woman more than that; but time has dealt very kindly with you. I should have known you any where."

Lady Hillington could turn her thoughts from her boy now; she was very kind and friendly in her greeting to Penelope, and the successful authoress confessed in her heart that this sweet, gracious woman was worthy the love and happiness she enjoyed.

"Do not go to Bankside," pleaded the Countess. If Meta were there I would not say one word in protest; but after being away from England so long, why should you return to a house which must be full of sad memories for you? Besides, and she lowered her voice, "some people think that Dr. Bertram is certain to return to Bankside before long to recure some of his wife's valuables. Living in hiding as they must be doing proves very costly, and he is certain to need money soon."

Mrs. Barton shook her head.

"I knew Dr. Bertram well under another name. I think he would be more alarmed than myself at our meeting. I thank you a hundred times for

your kind invitation, Lady Hillington, but it would spoil our play. Remember my rôle. I am to present myself at Bankside knowing nothing of recent events there, and claim my sister-in-law's hospitality. I only hope the servants will not refuse me admission."

"You need have no fear of that," interposed the Earl, "for the butler, a very sensible young fellow, is so much concerned at the vast responsibility thrust on him, that he will be positively thankful to have someone to refer to."

And so it proved.

Had she been an invited guest Mrs. Barton could not have met with a more respectful welcome. She was installed in a small suite of apartments on the first floor, and the whole household seemed relieved to have someone among them to whom they could look for direction.

"I'd have hung up my situation the morning I heard of the charge against Dr. Bertram, ma'am," confessed the butler, "but you see I have my character to look to. It will be hard enough to secure a good post after being mixed up in such an affair as this, so when Sir Claude Hardy came over one day and told me he'd be wanting a butler by Christmas, and that if I'd do my duty here to the place and my absent mistress I should have the first chance, why, naturally, I jumped at it."

"You must consider me answerable for your wages while I am here," said the American authoress, "and I want you to try and think over everything that has happened since you came here, and see if we can't find a clue to my niece's whereabouts."

John shook his head sadly.

"I believe myself, ma'am, that woman 'Nurse Margaret' has taken Miss Rivers away and is hiding her somewhere. I shall always say that woman did a deal of mischief, and quite a low sort too, ma'am, no more like a nurse than I am. A charwoman's nearer the mark, I thought when I first saw her."

Then began a time of weary waiting which was intensely trying to all concerned. Morally speaking Paul Hardy was cleared of the faintest suspicion of guilt, and so the Rev. Mr. Dynevor managed to conquer his scruples and offer to take Paul back as his curate without waiting for the trial of Dr. Bertram.

But to the Rector's amazement his offer was refused, firmly, but courteously, and when he asked the reason he was not best pleased with the answer he received.

"I could never work with you again without remembering how you misjudged me, and as it happens I am not seeking a curacy."

"What, giving up your profession? I am surprised."

"Not precisely that. You may not have heard, perhaps, that the Vicar of Combe Martin is dead!"

"Dead!" Mr. Dynevor's face betrayed the liveliest interest, for Combe Martin living was worth nine hundred a year, while Hillington was not a third of that sum. Besides, Combe Martin possessed a lovely vicarage, and though only seven miles from Hillington was within sound of the sea. Both benefices were in the Earl's gift, and for a good many years now Mr. Dynevor had looked upon his promotion to Combe as certain. The old Vicar could not last long, he told his wife, and then—

"Dead!" he repeated, in reply to Paul's question. "No, I had not heard of it; well, he was nearly ninety and very infirm; we can hardly regret him."

"He was a saint upon earth," said Paul, simply, "and I fear I shall never attain to his merits; but since Lord Hillington is so kind as to wish me to make the attempt—"

"You can't mean that the Earl has offered you Combe Martin!" gasped the other.

"Yes; but I shall not be instituted for three months. The curate will take charge of the parish in the interval."

Mr. Dynevor felt that he had not scored. Had he stuck loyally and faithfully to his curate, in the summer, things might have gone differently. The Earl had never been very friendly to him since Paul Hardy left Hillington. Perfectly polite, he had yet marked his displeasure, and

Mr. Dynevor felt persuaded in his own mind this was the outcome.

Paul and Molly had returned to Mayfield-road, Phillis Marston was back in her lodgings then, and Bob Ormond found his presence urgently needed in London, at least, that was the reason he gave the Countess for cutting short his visit to the Castle; but as he found time to run down and call on Paul Hardy nearly every day the business could not have been of a very engrossing nature. It was as though everything had come to a deadlock, and nothing more could be undertaken until Louis Bertram's hiding place was discovered.

Lord Fane spent his time between the Castle and his London chambers, journeying continually from one to the other with the restlessness of despair, the first detective of the day could discover nothing, it really seemed that her stepfather had hidden Meta skillfully enough to baffle the efforts of her best friend.

"They must have left the country," Lord Hillington told Penelope Barton, when he was calling on her about a fortnight after her arrival, "or else they must have been found by now."

Penelope shivered.

"I wish I had come over six months sooner. I try hard not to think harshly of my sister-in-law, but it seems to me most of our troubles are her fault."

"There's no woman does so much harm as a silly one," admitted the Earl; and Penelope, when I see my boy's misery I feel I can never forgive Mrs. Bertram until Meta is safely restored to us."

Penelope said very little at the time, but after the Earl had left a strange restless fit took possession of her. She wandered from one room to another as though she could not settle anywhere, a nameless presentiment that something was about to happen took hold of her. So convinced was she that some crisis was at hand, that when—according to his custom—the butler brought in her bed-room candle at eleven, she made no attempt to retire; but, throwing some coals on the fire, and wrapping herself in a thick shawl, she sat down with a firm determination to wait—she could not have told for what.

The sitting-room was the middle of the three which had been prepared for her. Her own bedroom and her maid's both opened from it; but as the doors were guarded by portier curtains of thick warm plush, no draught resulted.

The maid was not one of Mrs. Barton's regular servants, but a girl of rather higher social standing, whom she had brought with her feeling that she might need a little companionship and womanly sympathy.

When the butler had departed Mrs. Barton opened the door leading to Lotty's room, and called her.

"I wish you would sit up with me for an hour or two," she said, gently, "I can't explain it to you, but I feel something is going to happen, and I can't go to bed."

Lotty came in and sat down. She was a pretty, vivacious girl, English by birth, but with a touch of American shrewdness, born of a long residence in New York. Her manner to her employer was respectful enough, but she did not use the orthodox "ma'am."

"I am so glad you called me, Mrs. Barton; I was feeling I could not go to bed either. About half-an-hour ago I saw a tall, dark man standing on the gravel-path outside, looking up at these windows, and it gave me quite a turn!"

Penelope started.

Professor Varinski, alias Dr. Bertram, was "tall and dark;" could it be that his money exhausted, he had crept back, like a thief in the night, to make a raid on some of the valuables of Bankside?

Lotty went on eagerly,—

"It made me feel a little scared, for you know, Mrs. Barton, my room is the very last in this wing; and at the end of the corridor is a staircase leading directly to the grounds."

"Supposing anyone comes up that staircase,

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we should hear them, as we sit here?" remarked Penelope. "Should you be frightened, Lotty?"

"Not with you," replied the girl, frankly; "but if I met a burglar alone, I should scream." Mrs. Barton put out her lamp; then she and Lotty sat on in silence; the fire gave light enough for them to see; but anyone watching the house from without would not have seen the glow of the coals because of the thick blind. To them the house would have seemed in darkness; its inhabitants wrapped in sleep.

And later, not long after midnight, Penelope's quick ear caught a sound; the faint click given by a door a person is vainly trying to close noiselessly; then came the sound of muffled footsteps, nearer, nearer.

Penelope looked at her companion.

"Lotty, I want you to go downstairs and ring the alarm-bell they sound here in case of fire or sudden danger, you know just where the rope hangs."

She made the girl leave by way of her (Penelope's) own bedroom, but she herself waited where she was breathlessly listening to the sound of those muffled footsteps which came nearer, nearer.

(To be continued.)

THE DOCTOR'S SECRET.

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CHAPTER XXXV.

Mrs. Moore little dreamed as she started on that eventful journey, what its outcome would be. No one saw her as she opened the door of the main entrance and stole softly out.

Ah! how cold it was, and she was so lightly clad to face such bitter weather!

The snow was falling in great blinding flakes, and the air was bitter cold. The high, driving wind sent the snow fairly through the thin shawl which she had wrapped about her.

"I—I am afraid I shall never be able to reach the place," she muttered, hurrying along with great difficulty.

Which way should she turn?

"I am not as young as I once was," she muttered. "There is no longer bounding blood in these old veins to keep out the cold."

It seemed to her that every step she took must be her last.

On and on she wandered. She had forgotten the address that Mona had given her; she only remembered the name of the doctor, and she repeated it over and over again.

There seemed to be a strange, subtle music in the sound of it.

The terrible storm that had commenced increased; the wind blew a gale. No one noticed the poor old figure that sunk down on the sidewalk and was unable to rise again. The terrible cold and driving blast seemed to pass over her without touching her now. Unconsciousness soon wrapped her senses in oblivion. In another moment of time the poor old soul would have been lost to this world had not a carriage driven up, and the lady who was seated within looked out and seen the figure lying half buried in the snow.

Calling quickly to her coachman, she pointed to the prostrate form.

"William," she cried, "jump down from the box quickly. Place the woman yonder within the carriage if she is yet alive, and be quick about it."

The coachman was well used to such orders from his mistress, and hurried to do her bidding. Miss Maria Smithson, for it was she, looked on with great interest as the man plunged knee-deep through the great drifts until he reached the senseless woman.

"I reckon you found her just in time, ma'am," he said, opening the door and depositing his burden on the opposite seat. "Where to, ma'am?"

"We are nearer home than anywhere else; drive there, William."

A smart drive of a very few moments brought them to their destination. The old lady was

carried quickly into the little unpretentious red-brick cottage of the great heiress.

Miss Smithson's housekeeper lost no time in applying restoratives to the unconscious woman.

"She will be all right now very soon," said the housekeeper, cheerily.

Miss Smithson came to the couch and bent over her. Then for the first time she noticed that under her shawl was the regulation garb of the poor, and as she looked closer at her she recognized her face.

"Poor old soul," she muttered. "Life has few enough charms for you at the best; still it is sweet, at any rate, I suppose."

As Mrs. Moore was regaining consciousness, Maria was surprised to hear her moan continuously the name of "Doctor Forbes."

"Would you like Doctor Forbes sent for?" asked Miss Smithson, kindly.

"Yes," answered the old woman.

It brought tears to her eyes to see the wrinkled old face brighten.

"Very well; I will send for him at once," said Maria, quietly. "You should not have left your comfortable quarters in a storm like this," she went on. "It was not wise. However, we shall have you all right again in a very short time, my good woman."

"Oh, you are so good," she murmured, faintly, opening her dimmed eyes and gazing up wonderingly at the kindly face bending intently over her.

Miss Smithson remembered her perfectly. When she had first seen her she thought it was a pity that this refined old lady should be obliged to end her days in the poor-house. She also remembered the story she had told her of the bright little lad, her only son, from whom poverty had separated her; of the one hope of her life, that she should live to see him again; of the letters he had written in his childhood, saying:

"The first Christmas after I am twenty-one, I shall come to you, mother. Watch for me on Christmas Day."

Many a Christmas had come and gone, but he had not returned, though she had watched and waited for him.

"When he does come back he will not know where to find me," she had moaned, pathetically. "He would never think of looking for his poor old mother in the workhouse."

To Maria Smithson, when she heard the story, it had been a wonderful example of the depth of a mother's unwavering love. At each visit she had always a kind word for the poor old soul, who eagerly looked forward to Miss Smithson's monthly charitable visits to the poor-house.

Miss Smithson lost no time in sending for Doctor Gordon Forbes.

The young doctor was not at home when the message arrived; it was quite an hour later ere he received it. He was rather surprised at the summons from Miss Smithson, for he had seen her carriage roll by only a short time before.

"I hope she has not met with an accident," he thought.

Ordering his carriage, he drove off, and soon arrived at the little red-brick cottage occupied by Miss Smithson.

That lady herself met him at the door, and hurriedly explained to him the situation.

"What an angel among women she is!" thought the young doctor, admiringly. "Who but she would have taken such an interest in this poor old creature!"

There was one thing, however, which Miss Smithson forgot to mention to him; that the poor old soul had called for him; and this omission caused a world of sorrow.

"I am afraid that she is in a fever by this time," said Miss Smithson.

"That looks very bad," he replied, gravely; adding, "Had you not better send her where she can have more care than you can give her?"

"No," said Miss Smithson in her low, sweet voice. "Somehow, I have taken quite a fancy to the dear old lady, and I will keep her here with me. I fancy that the authorities will only be too glad to get rid of the charge."

By this time they had entered the room.

When Gordon Forbes crossed the threshold, it seemed to him as though an electric shock passed through his being, vibrating with every pulsation of his heart.

During all the years of his practice he never remembered to have had the same feeling while bending over a patient.

The poor old lady was unconscious. The young doctor made a hasty diagnosis of the case. He did not think her illness would prove fatal.

"What a beautiful, expressive face she has," he said to himself, enthusiastically, as he chafed her worn hands in his.

"I want you to give her your best care, doctor," said Miss Smithson, "and you will be paid just as well for it by me as though she were a woman of wealth."

"Miss Smithson," he said, huskily, "you need have no fear; this lady shall receive the very best attention from me; but I cannot accept remuneration for my services from you. Let her be my care as well as yours. Like yourself, there is something about her which appeals strongly to my heart, I know not why."

How he studied every line of her face! How tenderly he lifted her up in his great, strong, stalwart arms to a better position.

Miss Smithson never knew what a grand and noble heart he really possessed until that moment. He smoothed the wrinkled brow and caressingly brushed the gray hair from the hollow temples.

Just before he was leaving, to Miss Smithson's great surprise, he stooped and laid his fresh, warm lips upon the old withered cheek.

What prompted the action he himself could not have told.

"I kiss her for the sake of those whom she has loved and lost in her past life," he said, with a suspicious moisture in his fine blue eyes. "I had a mother once whom I lost, who might perchance have come to this had she lived long enough—to—old age, I mean," he added, hastily. "And for her dear sake, all elderly ladies, no matter what their station in life may be, are very sacred to me. I could not think of charging for any service I might render this lady. I repeat, let her be my charge as well as yours, Miss Smithson."

She acquiesced, well knowing that it was a good thing to foster so kindly a spirit in his heart.

"There is just one thing I would like to ask of you," he said, "and that is not to mention to Miss LeClerc that you have called me in to attend to this poor lady's case."

"He does not wish her to know just how tender-hearted he is," thought Miss Smithson, as she readily gave the required promise to him.

This was indeed not far from the truth.

Leaving the most minute instructions as to the care of his patient, and asking that he be sent for at once if the old lady took an unfavourable turn, he took his leave.

He had scarcely taken his departure ere Miss LeClerc's carriage drew up before Miss Smithson's door.

"I have come to take you for a ride through the park," she said. "Gus will join us later."

"I should be delighted to go if it were not for a patient I have to look after."

And she related from beginning to end the finding of the old lady in the snow-drift, and how she had brought her in and cared for her, not mentioning that she was an old lady from the workhouse.

"Well—well," said Grace LeClerc, "you must have patience to spare! Poor people such as you interest yourself in would annoy me to death. It is a wonder you don't start a hospital," she added, comically.

"I mean to endow one some day," said Miss Smithson, quietly. "Come and see my poor old lady, and then you will not wonder that I took such an interest in her, she's such a dear old soul!"

"Excuse me, but I'd rather not," said Grace LeClerc, with a shrug of her shapely shoulders. "If you take my advice, you'll turn her out into the street. Just as likely as not she is a thief."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"No, I will not believe that she is a thief; she is only a harmless, poor old soul," said Miss Smithson, bravely.

"I should not like to trust anything in her way," persisted Miss LeClerc. "I believe she is a fraud!"

It grieved Miss Smithson to hear her charge thus heartlessly spoken of.

"You need someone like Gus to look after you," the heiress went on heartlessly. "He would throw that old party out into the street quicker than you could think of it," she went on, with a laugh that sounded very harsh.

"Heaven forbid!" exclaimed Miss Smithson.

"Well, if you want to immure yourself in this house, and give up all your pleasures for the sake of paupers you pick up in the streets, why, I can't help you. You'd better take my advice, and bundle her out at once."

"Would you really have me turn the poor old soul out into the street?"

"Why, certainly."

"But it would mean certain death to her," said Miss Smithson, huskily.

"Well, what of it?" returned Miss LeClerc, coolly. "The world would be better off without such people. They are no good to themselves, and nuisances to other people."

"Heaven has use for every living being," returned Maria Smithson, in a pained, sorrowful voice. "Everyone has a duty to perform, and they are not called until their work is done, rest assured of that."

"A very pretty theory," said Miss LeClerc, curling her lip; "but I certainly doubt it. Now what possible good could your old pauper accomplish by living another month or year, I ask?"

"Heaven knows best what her duty is," said Miss Smithson. "Providence has certainly a good reason for wishing her to live, I am sure of that."

Miss LeClerc remained for an hour or more, and then took her departure.

"I do not know how poor dear Gus will ever get along with that prudish old maid," she thought. "Her goody-goody notions will set him wild."

That evening Miss LeClerc's brother paid his respects to his *fiancée*. He heard with horror and no little anger how she had picked up the destitute old woman and was caring for her.

He was more diplomatic than his sister. He made no comments when she told him about it, but deep in his heart he swore a mighty oath that he would stop such nonsense when he became master of the Smithson thousands.

"I am glad to think that he holds different views from his sister," mused Miss Smithson, "otherwise I should be afraid to trust my life's happiness in his hands."

"Maria," he said, suddenly, "I have a great deal to say to you this afternoon. Are you in the mood to listen to me?"

"Yes," she said, wonderingly.

"No doubt you will be surprised to hear what I have got to say," he went on. She looked at him with wondering eyes.

He took a folded paper from his pocket and handed it to her.

"Oh, this is a marriage license," she exclaimed all in a flutter.

He nodded and smiled.

"You see I could not wait, Emily," he declared. "Trousseau or no trousseau, we must be married to-day!"

She tried to expostulate with him, but he was inexorable.

"I thought we were to be married in the summer," she said, a rosy blush suffusing her face; "and I have ordered my wardrobe accordingly."

"If all lovers were as impatient as I am, then the brides to be would have little time to consider trousseaus."

"Give me your answer quick, Maria! It must be now or never with us."

He seemed to fairly carry her by storm. The next moment she had consented.

Gus insisted on ordering the carriage without delay, and they drove together to the church.

"We wish this ceremony over as quickly as

possible," said Mr. LeClercq to the officiating clergyman who was already awaiting them, as soon as he had presented him to Miss Smithson.

"I am pleased to say that it will take but a few moments, sir," responded the clergyman, opening his prayer-book.

One LeClercq took Maria Smithson's hand a little impatiently. Ah, what a thin, unresponsive hand it was.

She did not know the feeling of repugnance that came over him, and how he almost cursed the fate that made this millionaire so old, while he had such a great love for youth and beauty.

The responses were soon uttered, and almost before she was aware of it, Maria Smithson heard herself pronounced the wife of handsome, dashing Augustus LeClercq.

The words were hardly uttered ere she saw, or fancied she saw, a strange expression cross her husband's face.

"I will see you in a moment," he said to the clergyman; adding: "Would you mind stepping into the vestry, Maria?"

With all the trustfulness of a little child she followed him.

The door had scarcely closed behind them ere he turned to her.

"Would you mind paying the minister, Maria?" he said. "In my great hurry and overzealousness to reach here I forgot my note-book. I will give you back the amount to-night or to-morrow."

Maria drew forth her cheque-book.

"How much shall I draw the cheque for?"

"Well, say twenty-five pounds," he returned, carelessly.

She crossed over to the table, took out a blank cheque, and commenced writing the date.

"By the way, I think you might as well make that a thousand," he said, putting his arm carelessly around her.

She gave a start, and looked up at him.

"Shall you need as much as that?" she asked.

"Now, Maria, you dear, precious darling, don't stop to question your husband," he said, laughingly yet imperiously. "When I run up to the house for my own cheque-book, that I was careless enough to leave there, I shall make out a cheque for double the amount which you put down on that slip of paper, to show my gratitude for your kindness."

The tender caress and the words which accompanied it would have made many a woman more worldly wise than poor Maria imagine that he was deeply in love with her.

His hands closed quickly over the cheque. Then they drove home again.

There were no more kisses after that. As soon as they reached home he hurried from the room, declaring that the minister would think he had been gone an age.

A moment later he said to the clergyman,—"Mr. Johnson and I are going to walk up the street together, Maria. Do you mind being left alone?"

"No," she answered, scarcely knowing what to say.

"I will be back by dark, anyhow," he added. "By-bye," and with a very careless wave of his white hand he turned on his heel and quitted the room.

Maria stood quite still. Was it a dream or a reality, this sudden marriage of hers?

The housekeeper found her standing there quite half an hour after the front door had opened and closed.

"Miss Maria," she said, "you are looking strangely pale. Are you ill? Has anything happened to you?"

How could she tell her what had happened?

"Don't I look happy?" she said. "Couldn't you tell by my face that something had happened?"

"Come, Miss Maria, let me put you to bed. You have one of those fearful headaches which make you flighty," she said, as Miss Smithson began to laugh and cry by turns.

"Instead of putting me to bed I want you to help me find the prettiest dress I have, and see about getting up a nice little supper—such a

supper as we have never had before. I'll tell you why when I am donning my dress."

The old housekeeper was now sure that something was the matter with Miss Smithson. She had been working too hard of late, and now the reaction had set in.

"I will get any dress you wish. If you will only lie down and take a nap for just an hour. You can't imagine how it will refresh you."

"It does not seem to me that my brain will ever be calm enough to let me sleep again. How strange it is that a few short minutes can change the whole course of a life-time!"

The housekeeper thought it wisest not to get into an argument with her, so she responded, softly:

"Very true."

"It is less than an hour since I was talking to you up in my room," said Maria, reflectively.

"Oh, I might as well tell you what has happened," she added, huskily. "I—I have been married!"

"Heaven forbid!" muttered the housekeeper.

"Why do you say that?" asked Maria.

"Because there isn't a man that you know who is in any way worthy of you."

"Nevertheless it is true. The man who has just left this house with Mr. LeClercq is a minister, and he performed the marriage ceremony which made me the wife of—"

"Not that Mr. LeClercq?"

"Yes, Mr. LeClercq," said Maria, proudly.

"Heaven help us!" sobbed the housekeeper, unable to restrain her tears.

"Why do you say that?" demanded Maria.

"Oh, I don't want to say anything. If it's done, it's done!" muttered the old woman, rocking herself to and fro, and burying her face in her apron. "Though many and many an hour, far into the night, I prayed that it mightn't happen. Oh, forgive me for speaking my mind, but I could not help it. You know, Miss Maria, I've known you ever since you were a little child, and loved you, and it breaks my heart to see wrong done to you, for trouble will come of it, mark my words."

(To be continued.)

A FOOLISH PREJUDICE.

—101—

(Continued from page 153.)

"Do you know that I am very curious to learn what all this mystery means," observed Miss Denbigh, as they all stood in the brilliantly-lighted dining-room after their return, in response to her brother's note, and her brother laughingly told her that she must curb it until after dinner.

And after dinner he kept his promise, telling them the strange tale of the later will as they sat in the drawing-room.

The sweet, subtle scent of flowers stole in at the open window, and the musical ripple of bells was borne across the heath in a faint whisper. And as the story was finished the twilight closed in, and all Nature was hushed as though holding her breath, so that the little party should not be disturbed from their silent thoughts.

"I have telegraphed to Leonard. He will be here by to-morrow," said Tom Denbigh, presently, and Cora started. Her thoughts had been far away, and her uncle's voice breaking the silence so suddenly startled her, and that name sent the blood to her temples in a rich tide.

The lights were brought in soon after this, and then Lord Chestholm asked Cora to sing.

It was the first time the piano had been opened since Sir Jasper had died, and there was a light tremor in the rich voice as she commenced a simple Scotch ballad; after that she played an accompaniment for Lord Chestholm, while the three elder ones sat listening in calm, peaceful enjoyment.

Never very late, they retired earlier than usual

that evening, in order to be up betimes to receive Leonard, who was expected by the first train.

"He will be here in half an hour, auntie!" It was Cora's sweet voice, thrilling with tender love, that spoke these words. She was standing on the lawn in the bright sunshine, and the birds singing blithely in the grand old trees—the faint odoriferous scent of many flowers filling the morning air sent a thrill of gladness through her heart.

She was attired in a robe of soft, grey cashmere, and the fair face looked fairer than ever in its calm, tranquil beauty, after the sorrows and trials through which she had passed.

"Yes, dear," replied her aunt. "But come, Lady Chestholm must have finished writing those letters by now, and may think we neglect her."

And so they left the bright sunny garden and sought the library, where they found Lady Chestholm reclining in an easy chair, gazing sadly out at the fair landscape that lay before her for the window commanded a view of field, heath-land and silvery streamlet.

"Hark, there is the carriage!" Miss Denbigh cried suddenly, almost immediately after they entered, and they all hurried out into the hall where Leonard stood, looking more manly and sunburnt than of yore, but still the old Leonard for all that.

Cora greeted him calmly, even coldly, in her anxiety to hide the love that rose and surged within her at sight of his handsome face, and Leonard, mistaking that calmness for indifference felt his heart turn like ice.

He went at once to his own room, and after removing the travel stains from his face, descended to the dining-room, where the others were assembled.

"Len, my boy!" began his father, laying his hand on his shoulder; "prepare yourself for a great surprise. You are Sir Jasper's heir, and not George Newcombe!"

"What, sir?" cried Leonard, flushing beneath the bronze. "And Agnes has married a beggar, after all her scheming." These last words were not spoken aloud.

"It is true!" replied his father; and he then proceeded to explain the conditions of the will.

"And have you written to George?" asked his son; a touch of pity in his voice, for he knew that his false beautiful cousin had married George Newcombe for his money, loving himself all the while.

"Yes, and I have sent him the letter. Here is the one addressed to you," and he handed him the packet.

"Excuse me for a few moments," said Leonard, turning to Lady Chestholm, who smiled up graciously into his handsome face.

"I wonder what that letter contains!" observed Judith Denbigh.

Meanwhile Leonard stood at the open window in his own room, the warm breeze lifting the heavy dark waves from his brow, and fluttered the pages of the letter while he read, with pallid cheek and quivering lip.

"My dear nephew," it ran, "that old and silly prejudice of mine has died out, and the dearest wish of my heart is that you and Cora will marry. But my purpose in writing to you is not to speak of that, but of a weightier matter."

"You remember the day of the picnic Agnes and George strolled off together to visit the Lower Glen. Well, it so happened that Tom and I took the same path, and, not being aware of their nearness to us, I told him that I had made my will, leaving all my money to George. Tom—I mean your father—left me then to hurry the lunch."

"Imagine my surprise and sorrow when I heard George, his voice hoarse and strained—George, whom I had brought up and loved as my own son—whisper to his companion, Agnes, you hear, I am to be his heir. The old fool cannot live for ever!"

"I would not swear that the words are correctly strung together, for his tones rose and fell with emotion, but they were enough for me. The night you went to Lady Chestholm's musical soiree I paid a visit to a lawyer in the town, and made a new will, under which you, my boy, will

inherit what that arch hypocrite will fancy, when the first will is read, belongs to him. I am not naturally revengeful, but I cannot help smiling when I think of his disappointment. Leonard, the letter went on, as though the writer had been suddenly overpowered with a sense of the mystery of death; "something tells me that I shall not live much longer. Remember my last words spoken as from the grave, Cora, my sweet faithful Cora, loves you; but do not link her fate with yours until you are sure of yourself. It grows late; already the moon has risen, flooding the heath with silvery light, and the old church stands at the top of the hill in silent grandeur. Farewell! For when you read this, I shall have bid an eternal farewell to earth."

"JASPER DENBIGH."

"Dear old boy!" muttered Leonard, hesitatingly, turning his eyes in the direction of the church where Sir Jasper slept.

"It must have been a terrible blow to him!" He stood there for some moments; then, with a hasty exclamation, turned and descended the wide staircase, and again entered the dining-room.

"Read it aloud, please, father," he said handing the letter to Tom Denbigh, who read it amidst a hushed silence.

"I never liked his voice," was Lady Chestholm's comment. "It was too smooth; and his eyes, they were treacherous eyes!"

No answer was made to this remark, but she felt that her words were echoed in every heart. Luncheon being brought in at that moment the conversation was changed for lighter topics.

"Great Heaven above!"

Agnes Newcombe looked up in indolent surprise, and a faint tinge of colour rose to her pearly skin as she saw the ghastly change that had come over her husband's face.

"What is it, George?" she asked, rising and laying her hand upon his arm.

They were staying at Naples, that beautiful city of orange groves and silvery streams. Outside the birds gave forth a trill of softest melody in the full-leaved trees, and George turned as if unheeding her smooth, seductive voice, and gazed fixedly at the water that flowed peacefully at the end of the garden below.

Not a breath stirred the calm smoothness of the stream, and the leaves hung listless on the trees as though hushed into silence by the song of the birds, and Agnes felt a superstitious thrill pass through her. It seemed as if Nature drew back awed.

"And for this I stained my hands with blood!" he whispered hoarsely, still with that fixed look on his death face.

Blood! Agnes's fair, haughty face paled, and the scarlet lips grew rigid at that word. A thousand haunting memories flashed through her mind as she stood there like some beautiful statue by her guilty husband's side. This, then, was the meaning of his restless wanderings, his sudden starts and fearful glances at every dark and secluded spot. He was a murderer!

She did not speak—no words would come through her stiff lips; but better as it was, for there was no pity in her heart for the man who had stained his soul with blood to gain her, and whom she had married for his money. No, only a feeling of utter loathing for the man filled her mind, as she gazed upon the drawn, haggard features and bloodshot eyes. She guessed whose blood had been shed by those white nervous hands, and a shudder ran through her.

George Newcombe turned abruptly and went up to his own apartment, leaving the letter which had called forth those despairing words upon the breakfast-table, and his wife took it up mechanically and read it through to the end. There was a scornful light in her pale eyes when she laid it down, and the thin-lipped mouth was curled in a contemptuous smile.

"Poor wretch!" she said, aloud. "But I suffer too. What is to become of me, chained for life to a murderer, and he as poor as a church mouse!"

As if in answer to her question there rang, with fearful distinctness, through the long cor-

ridors the sound of firearms, after that dead silence, then the rushing of many feet, and a man with sorrowful visage, bowing low before the haughty English lady, informed Agnes that she was a widow!

"Your cousin Agnes writes that she is going to Germany with her friend, Mrs. Lorton. She bears up wonderfully under her terrible affliction," said Miss Denbigh to Cora, as they stood at the breakfast-room window in Thanet House a month later.

Cora murmured a very small "yes," for she had burnt a letter from that young lady, in which she told her cousin that perhaps it was all for the best that George was dead, though she wished his death had not been so terrible a one.

George being dead of course there was no trouble about the new will, and, with the exception of an extra two hundred a-year to Agnes, the money had all been made over to Leonard.

Lord Chestholm and his mother had gone to Paris, and would not be back till Christmas.

It was a glorious day, more like a day in the middle of August than November. The flowers no longer scented the air with their sweet perfume, but the birds hummed drowsily in the trees that overhung the stream that wound its way at the end of the grounds belonging to Thanet House, and the sun shone down brightly, even warmly. Here by the water's margin the silver weed lifted their heads to the blue sky listening in unvarying joy to the soft song of the stream as it rippled on its way. And here Leonard bent his steps, with Cora by his side, whispering anew his love and longing into her delicate, dainty ear.

"Cora, dearest!" he cried, passionately stopping beneath a weeping willow that spread its branches over the deep green grass and clear water. "Have I not waited long enough yet? Surely you must know that my love is true—true until death!"

The girl raised her deep purple eyes to his dark passionate face, and that glance told him that he was forgiven, for he gathered the slender form close to his heart, and pressed a long tender kiss upon her perfect lips. And so we leave them, like the rich golden sunshine flooding heath and stream, the sleepy hum of birds filling the air, and on their faces and in their happy throbbing hearts the light of the sun that never sets!

[THE END.]

ON THE OCEAN.—You dread the dangers and discomforts of the sea, and for that reason should prepare yourself for them. On sailing day, after the last bell has rung and you have bade adieu to weeping friends, descended hastily to your state-room, unpack combs, brushes, etc., and arrange them in the racks prepared for them. Take off your travelling suit and hang it up. Then don the forlornest robe in your possession; you have brought it with you for the purpose, only let it be thick and dark; you can pitch it into the sea or give it to the stewards after the voyage is over. After this put on wraps and capucine and go on deck to watch the vessels come down and out of the harbour. Eat whatever you like and whenever you feel like it. If you are thirsty, eschew lemonade as you would tartar emetic, and drink seltzer water; food claret and water is very nice and wholesome with dinner. If possible go on deck before breakfast—go on deck if it takes you two hours to dress, and you wish you were dead a hundred times during the operation. Seasickness is its own cure, but after a day or two, when only nausea remains, fresh air is an unfailing panacea; therefore take as much of it as weather will permit. Don't be frightened at any unusual noise you may hear; for the first day or two all noises will be unusual, and for the first night or two imagination will fill you with horrors. After a time you will begin to realise that those horrible shrieks you hear are only the sailors singing—meaning, I should rather say—at their work, and that the awful scraping, which sounds just as though ten icebergs were menacing the vessel, and which, in fact, you are quite sure are icebergs, is only caused by the innocently noisy operation of holly-stoning the deck.

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FACETIÆ

JACK: "Do you ever take pills?" Maude: "This is so sudden."

SHE (passionately): "Will you ever love another, dearest?" He (wearily): "No, never, if I get out of this affair alive."

ETHEL: "Yes, I've brought him to my feet at last." Clarissa: "Well, take care you don't let him see them or you won't keep him long."

DR. JALAP: "Let me see your tongue, please." Patient: "Oh doctor, no tongue can tell how bad I feel."

NICKLEBY: "Your cook has been with you a long time, has she not?" Cheeryble: "We have been with her for five years."

LITTLE ELSIE: "Ain't those cows small, ma?" Ma: "Yes, dear." Elsie: "I guess them's the kind that they gets condensed milk from, ain't they?"

"I say, do you think that Wiggins is a man to be trusted?" "Trusted? Yes, rather. Why I'd trust him with my life." "Yes, but with anything of value, I mean."

MR. MOSER: "O, Rebecca, my heart it was broke. Dere's a pad sovereign in de till." Mrs. Moser: "Nefer mind, dear; give it to Ikey tomorrow for his birthday."

"This blackberry pudding isn't nearly so good as those mother used to make." "No; I told your mother this morning when she made it that you would be sure to find fault with it."

MR. GABBER: "Where's Mrs. Gabber?" Servant: "Somebody told her an important secret this morning, and she has been out all day going from house to house visiting her friends."

"My part in the amateur theatricals could not have been a complete failure. They did not like me." "Of course not," replied her girl friend. "People cannot yawn and hiss at the same time."

"I don't see why you asked Mr. Bohr to sing," said the pretty girl's sister. "I did not like to do it," was the reply. "But it was the only way to make him stop talking."

HEARD between two friends: "My dear fellow, is it really you? I have not seen you for ages; in what quarter of the world are you living now?" "First quarter of the honeymoon, my friend; I was married a week ago."

"THE doctor's ordered your husband whisky for his rheumatism. Does it do him any good?" "He says it does him a world of good, but I notice the twinges come upon him more frequently than ever."

POET: "Why did you change the title of my contribution to 'Fancies: a Poem'?" "I had it just 'Fancies.' Editor: 'Didn't want to deceive the public. Readers have a right to know what it is they are reading.'"

MRS. HUDSON (to her husband, who has come home with a black eye and no hat): "Ah, that's what you get for riding a bicycle." Mr. Hudson: "No, my dear; it's what I got for not being able to ride one."

"I BELIEVE," said the candidate, "that my country calls me." "If you are alludin' ter that noise you heard just now," said the old farmer, "you are somewhat mistaken. His war nothin' but the ole mule a-brayin' in the yard."

A YOUNG person at a concert conscientiously sang, so as to set your teeth on edge, the fine air, "I sing well when he is near." An impatient listener arose and said in a loud voice, "It would appear that he has not yet arrived."

NERVOUS OLD INDIVIDUAL: "Well, Mrs. Nipper, I think it's quite time the passage walls were repaired." Landlady: "Pardn' 'em, but I am a-waitin' to see 'ow your 'air goes on. Coffins is such awkward things to knock the paper off, a-comin' down."

"My son," asked Farmer Goshley, "what is it that causes the rotary motion of the earth?" "I'm sure I don't know, father!" "My son, come to my arms. You have been six months at college and there is one thing you are sure you don't know!"

LITTLE BOY: "Mamma, why are you so cross at me all the time?" Tired Mamma: "Because you keep doing wrong, and I want to make an impression on your mind." Little Boy: "Well, mamma, I guess if you'd be good-natured just once it would make a bigger impression."

SEE: "You may say what you will, I think you will find that women are less wicked than men. I expect that Heaven will be inhabited principally by women." He: "Very likely. The men, of course, will generally be found in the smoking-room below."

"THERE is nothing, my friend, for the health like gymnastics. They augment a man's strength and lengthen his days." "But our ancestors didn't go in for gymnastics." "Our ancestors! Of course, they didn't. And where are they now? All dead."

ENTHUSIASTIC PROPRIETOR: "What do you think of the new hotel?" Prospective Guest (indifferently): "Rather fine." E. P.: "Fine! Grand, I think. Did you notice the fresco work in the dining-room and the new furniture in the hall?" P. G.: "Yes, I noticed them." E. P. (persistently): "Well, what do you think?" P. G. (glumly): "Oh, I suppose I'll have to pay for them before I leave!"

LITTLE DICK: "Mamma, may I go and play with Bobby Walker, and stay there to dinner if they ask me?" Mamma: "I thought you didn't like Bobby Walker!" "I didn't, but as I passed his house just now my heart softened towards him." "Did he look lonely?" "No, mamma, he looked happy." "What about?" "He said his mother was making apple-dumplings."

THE underlying principles which govern feminine fashions are sometimes hard for the masculine mind to comprehend. A country paper relates that a man went with his wife while she bought some dress-goods. "This stuff," he said, "is pretty, and would make you a nice dress." "That!" said the wife in contempt; "nobody is wearing that now!" "Then how about this?" asked the husband, indicating another sort. "Oh, that wouldn't do at all! Everybody's wearing that!"

A TUTOR was explaining to his two pupils a few grammatical rules. "The first person is the person speaking," he explained; "the second person is the person spoken to; the third person is the person spoken of." A few minutes later the boys began whispering together. "You must not whisper," said the tutor. "It is rude to whisper when a third person is present." "I know why," said the youngest, with a twinkle. "Why?" asked the tutor. "Because the third person is the person spoken of."

SHE was an amateur photographer, and had been showing him the results of her work. "You developed all your negatives yourself?" he said, inquiringly. "All myself!" she answered proudly. "That's what frightens me and makes me hesitate," he said, thoughtfully. "You see, there's a question I'd like to ask if I thought you could develop an affirmative." Being a wise girl she lost no time in assuring him that she could if the conditions were right; and he discovered in little less than a minute that the conditions were just right, and that the process of developing an affirmative was all that had been claimed for it by the most enthusiastic of lovers.

"AH, MUMMY DEAR, do let Liland me have our dinner wif you and dad to-day; we will be so very quiet, and only speak to our own selves." The mother, proud of her two girls, after a moment's pause, replied: "Well, if you will be very quiet you may; but dad has some men friends coming to lunch, and I expect Aunt Lucilla and Miss Celia Browne, so no chattering, my pets."

For some time the wee mites behaved in a most exemplary manner, when, suddenly, one of those pauses which will occur at the best regulated tables revealed the following conversation: "When I grows up, Lily, I shall plait my hair on the handle of the door, like Aunt Lucilla does." "Will you?" responded the other imp. "Well, I'll have my teeth set in gold like Miss Celia Browne!" Tabou.

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I will send a valuable, instructive, and highly interesting book which every woman would be glad to have. Contains important and confidential advice, and tells how to keep healthy and avoid the anxieties so distressing to all. Sent free, securely sealed, for one stamp, to cover postage.—Address, **Professor R. A. LA SALLE,** Carburton House, Carburton Street, London, W.

SOCIETY.

A new lift is now being fitted at Marlborough House, principally for the use of the Princess of Wales, who, like the Queen, finds a difficulty in either ascending or descending a staircase.

THE Tzaritz, who is a skilled type-writer, ordered a machine in Paris with all up-to-date improvements, the type-bars of which are to be of gold, and the frame inlaid with pearls, Her Majesty's favourite gems.

THE Emperor of China is to have a portrait of Queen Victoria, inserted in a jewel, which Her Majesty intends despatching to that Sovereign in graceful acknowledgment of the costly gifts he sent to her by the hands of Li Hung Chang.

THE Prince and Princess of Wales will have quite a family assembly at Sandringham for the winter, the Duke and Duchess of York at York Cottage, the Duke and Duchess of Fife at Castle Rising, and Prince and Princess Charles of Denmark at Appleton, while it is not unlikely that the King and Queen of Denmark will arrive there next month.

ONE of England's most distinguished visitors next year will probably be the Nizam of Hyderabad. The announcements as to the arrangement for his journey are at present merely conjectural, though correspondents from India report that the Resident at Hyderabad has handed the Nizam an invitation from the Queen personally, and has further consulted His Highness as to the preliminary preparations for the journey to this country.

THE Empress Frederick is expected to arrive at Windsor Castle on the 20th inst., on a visit to the Queen, and she will stay in England for a month before proceeding to Berlin for the winter. The Empress is to spend a week at Sandringham with the Prince and Princess of Wales. Her Majesty's plans, however, are not quite fixed, as they depend upon the health of her youngest daughter, Princess Frederick Charles of Hesse, whose accouchement is expected very shortly.

TYPE WRITTEN documents do not find favour in the sight of the Queen. Her Majesty has, in fact, given orders that no such documents shall in future be laid before her, and none will of course be sent out by her officials that are supposed to emanate from the Sovereign. All the sentiment and impressiveness evaporate from a document or letter produced by a machine, and this is the chief reason why the Queen has set her face against the type-written paper.

In a quiet unobtrusive fashion, arrangements are being projected already, and a good deal of unsuspected activity shown in connection with what promises to be an absolutely unique event in the history of England. There is reason to believe that a quite exceptional number of foreign Royalties will visit England and take part in the rejoicings, and the season of 1897 may fairly be expected to eclipse even the never-to-be-forgotten one of ten years ago.

THE Duke and Duchess of York are to arrive at Welbeck Abbey on a visit to the Duke and Duchess of Portland on Tuesday, December 15th, and will stay there until Saturday the 19th. There will be a large house-party to meet the Royal guests, and the principal covers and the Clifton preserves are to be shot during the week. The Duke and Duchess of York are to arrive at Worksop, and on the day of their departure they will drive to Mansfield, where they are to be presented with an address.

NO Royal family in Europe has such a phenomenal number of late summer and autumn birthdays as that of the Duke of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha. Thus the birthday of the Duke is August 6th, that of Princess Alexandra of Hohenlohe-Langenberg September 1st, whilst on September 9th her eldest sister, the Crown Princess of Roumania, was twenty-one, and on October 15th her brother, Prince Alfred, was twenty-two. Two days later the Duchess, their mother, celebrated her forty-third birthday, and finally on November 25th the Princess Victoria Melita (the Grand Duchess of Hesse) will be twenty. The only member of the family born in another season is the youngest, the Princess Beatrice, who is twelve in April.

STATISTICS.

THERE are said to be over 3,000,000 deities in the Hindoo mythology.

IT has been estimated that it will require eighty-five men working every day until 1947 to unearth the entire ruins of Pompeii.

THE marriage rate in Great Britain, which has been steadily declining in recent years, is again on the increase.

SUNDAYS and fixed holidays excepted, £20,000 worth of fish are daily dragged out of the sea by the fishermen of England.

THE number of eggs a hen may lay has been estimated by a German naturalist as follows:—The ovary of a hen contains about 600 embryo eggs, of which not more than twenty are matured the first year. The second year produces 120; the third 135, the fourth 114; and in the following four years the number decreases by twenty yearly. In the ninth year only ten eggs can be expected.

GEMS.

A SMOOTH sea never made a skilful mariner, neither do uninterrupted prosperity and success qualify for usefulness and happiness.

YOUTH is to all the glad season of life, but often only by what it hopes, not by what it attains or escapes.

GENIUS may, and often does, require an interpreter; but love speaks a language which all can understand.

WHOEVER sincerely endeavours to do all the good he can will probably do much more than he imagines, or will ever know till the day of judgment, when the secrets of all hearts shall be manifest.

THE growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts, and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited graves.

HOUSEHOLD TREASURES.

GRAPE MARMALADE.—Cook the grapes in a very little water until the skins are very tender. When cool, rub skins and pulp through a fine colander. Wash the kettle, return the pulp, add an equal measure of sugar, and cook ten or fifteen minutes.

BREAD SOUP.—Pound some dry crusts of bread, put them into boiling stock, season with salt and pepper, add a small pinch of grated nutmeg; let it boil up once or twice, and just before serving beat in three eggs previously well whisked. Serve at once with or without grated cheese.

ROASTED OYSTERS.—Scrub the shells well in cold water; place the oysters in a baking pan, laying them on the deep half of the shell. Bake in a hot oven until the shell is well open. Remove the upper shell carefully, and serve with butter, pepper, and salt.

BAKED ONIONS.—Select large, perfect onions, but do not peel, put into a kettle, cover with boiling water, salted, boil rapidly for one hour, drain, wipe dry, roll in tissue paper, put in a pan and bake slowly for half an hour, take off the papers, peel the onions, put into a vegetable dish and cover with melted butter; dust with salt and pepper.

STEWED TOMATOES.—Pare and slice ripe tomatoes; put into stewpan—not an iron one, as iron spoils the flavour—add a very little water, and cook fifteen or twenty minutes. Then add salt, pepper, and butter to season, and half a cup of cream or rich milk, and half a pint of bread crumbs; or, instead of the bread crumbs, stir one tablespoonful of flour in the cream, and add to the tomatoes while they are boiling.

MISCELLANEOUS.

DIVORCES are frequent in Japan. One marriage in every three ends in a legal separation.

AN auditor in a Japanese theatre is allowed, for a small fee, to stand up, and the unfortunate individual behind him has no right to remonstrate or to rise and get a peep at the stage. He may hear, but he cannot see.

BURMESE humanity to animals goes so far as to provide buffaloes kept in stables with mosquito netting. The mosquitoes are as annoying to cattle as to human beings, but when left out of doors the buffalo can protect himself by rolling in the mud and allowing it to cake upon him.

THE Sultan of Turkey, who consumes a larger number of cigarettes than any other royal personage in Europe, is run very closely by the German Emperor. The Kaiser's consumption of cigarettes is very large. The Czar of Russia has recently taken to cigarettes, but the pipe used to be his favourite.

IN Persia, among the aristocracy, a visitor sends notice an hour or two before calling, and gives a day's notice if the visit is one of great importance. He is met by servants before he reaches the house, and other considerations are shown him, according to relative rank. The left and not the right is considered the position of honour.

BALM should have a place in every garden. It grows easily from seed; the scent is delicious, and the qualities of the plant strengthening, purifying, and invigorating. Balm, too, should be drunk freely. It may be made of either fresh or dried leaves, and is equally efficacious hot or cold. With a little lemon-peel, or juice, and sugar, it is a most refreshing drink, and a few balm-leaves placed in the teapot, with China or Ceylon tea, will improve the flavour and wholesomeness of the decoction.

AMONG the curiosities of tropical plant life are the pearls found occasionally in the coconut palm of the Philippine Islands—pearls which, like those of the ocean, are composed of carbonate of lime. The bamboo, too, yields another precious product in the shape of true opals, which are found in its joints. In each case this mineral matter is, of course, obtained from the soil. The natives of the Celebes use these vegetable opals as amulets and charms against disease.

EVERY year the earth passes into what is known as the meteoric belt, and extensive preparations are being made for observing the conduct of the expected shower of meteors which is due in November. This modern exhibition is believed to be due to the earth's crossing a belt made up of minute bodies, the precise character of which has not been ascertained. The earth goes into this path about the 12th or 13th of November. These orbits are supposed to intersect during November, 1899, or November, 1900. It is believed that the belt is about one hundred thousand miles wide, but as the earth passes through it in an oblique direction, only about four or five hours are occupied in the flight.

IT has been so frequently stated of late that the problem of the flying machine has been solved, and investigation has proved that most of the claims are without practical foundation, that the majority of people need not be blamed if they express themselves as exceedingly incredulous on the subject of aerial navigation. It is amusing to note the curious forms that flying machines have taken. One model strikingly resembles an enormous grasshopper. There is a long cylindrical body and wing-shaped side pieces. The feet and antennae are tolerably well represented by the rods and braces that work and strengthen the machine. There are also models with overlapping sections resembling the sliding on a building. A quaint and curious model is dome-shaped and worked with pedals. The problem of flying may be solved at some time in the future, but so far as has been made public, there is little yet invented that gives reasonable assurance of flying, at least during the life of the present generation.

NOTICES TO CORRESPONDENTS.

THOMAS.—You cannot remove it now.
TAPPY.—Not unless the will so provides.
CARPIO.—"Not proven" was the verdict.
G. B.—We have nothing further to suggest.
IGNORANT.—A kopje is a small rough stone fort.
DARRY.—Darry is a city in the County of London-derry.

W. A.—The memorandum had better be shown to a lawyer.

HOBACE.—Take counsel's opinion on the whole matter.

WAYFARER.—Addresses are never given in these columns.

G. C.—The cost of telegrams to Cape Colony is 5s. 2d. per word.

MALTA.—Malta is 2,020 miles (sailing distance) from Plymouth.

THIRD FINGER.—On the finger next to the little finger of the left hand.

LENNIE.—Take it to a dealer and ask him to name the price he would give.

H. K.—The shortest sea route from London to Hong Kong, is 9,700 miles.

BEST MAN.—He pays the clergyman and furnishes the bouquet for the bride.

CORRECTLY.—We have no personal knowledge of the appliance you mention.

BEAUTIFUL.—Persons with black hair and eyebrows are usually classed as brunettes.

FAIRLION.—You should get a cabinet maker to see it; it is impossible to advise without.

NIMO.—An illegitimate son retains the name by which he has been hitherto known.

A. B. C.—An action for breach of promise cannot be brought against a person under age.

YOUNGER SON.—The eldest son is not entitled to any larger share than the other children.

S. A. S.—She can only obtain a decree of judicial separation on a summons for assault.

SON.—Sentence of imprisonment usually dates from the commencement of the sessions or assizes.

WORKING MAN.—A workman cannot compel an employer to give him a "character" on leaving.

THANKFUL.—We have given this so often that we must refer you to a book number for the information.

FLORIAN.—A little alcohol rubbed on quickly will leave the panes bright and shining if wiped dry.

ART.—We cannot tell you which is "the most celebrated picture" of the five artists named by you.

GINGER.—The nearest measure to those you mention are a hoghead (64 gallons) and a butt (108 gallons).

AMBER.—There is black, white, brown, and green amber, as well as that of the ordinary yellow colour.

PAINTING.—You are not obliged to continue your apprenticeship after attaining the age of twenty-one.

ROCK.—No stuff short of tar will make the coat of a naturally rough dog, such as a terrier, lie down smooth.

TOPPER.—Yes; next year is the centennial of the silk hat, which first came into common use in Paris in 1797.

SWEET MARK.—Sponge with pure alcohol mixed with a little water. If this does not suffice take it to the druggist.

A. W.—You can write on the envelope "Waiting for an answer," or "Will you please answer as writer is waiting."

SORE THROAT.—White of egg beaten with loaf sugar and lemon relieves soreness. Take a teaspoonful once every hour.

LINGUIST.—The three most important languages in Europe would be—English, French, then German and Spanish equally.

H. H.—If the money belongs to the wife—earned by her, or bequeathed to her—the husband's creditors have no claim upon it.

INDIGNANT.—If you do not leave at the end of the month's notice the landlord can obtain a magistrate's order to eject you.

FRIVOLITY.—It is the custom of most publications to answer only such topics as will be of benefit to a large number of readers.

E. G.—It is a custom peculiar to the north of England, where old mummeries and superstitions have still a sort of struggling existence.

TOMMY ATKINS.—Waterloo was fought with the musket known as "Old Brown Bess," a muzzle-loading weapon requiring a ramrod to force the charge home, and a percussion cap to explode it.

LOVER OF CATS.—Cats are exceedingly intelligent and sensitive animals and need excellent care. In fact, none is so animal that appreciates good care more or lives better on account of it. By all means take you with you, and take good care of them.

CHRISTMAS DOUBLE NUMBER OF THE "LONDON READER."
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M. D.—The marriage is still binding, and neither party can marry again unless the other has died or a divorce has been obtained.

JOHN O'GROATS.—The key must be given up at reasonable hour—not necessarily before noon. There is no precise rule on the point.

TRIOLE.—The cost of obtaining a divorce depends upon the circumstances of the case. Only a solicitor could give you a reliable estimate.

CARRIE.—The only way to stop it coming out is to get rid of the cause, if either damp or moth has gone too far there is nothing to be done.

YOM-YOM.—Gentlemen lift their hats to ladies the moment the ladies acknowledge the gentlemen, and that, of course, is before the parties pass each other.

R. G.—Insurance companies make their own laws regarding surrender value of policies given up by holders; we are not familiar with the rule of the company you are connected with; but a brief note to the secretary at head office asking him to be "good enough to tell you the present surrender value of your policy" would obtain the information at once.

NAPPY.—The afternoon nap is not a harmful one, as many people think. It is a physiological process, and as such is perfectly natural. When digestion is in progress, Nature arranges that all available blood in the body shall be called toward the digestive organs. This leaves the blood supply of the brain at a low ebb, and sleep is thus easily induced. Brain work at such a time is wrong.

PATRY.—Take off as much as will come away with a rag, rub in a little salt, then sprinkle liberally with powdered chalk, after which moisten and dry slowly. Or in place of salt moisten with lemon juice, and cover with a paste of soft soap and chalk, dry slowly. When you can do it the drying is best done in the sun. It may be necessary to repeat either process more than once.

DOMESTIC TREASURE.—The beef may or may not be larded; put a layer of vegetables in a stewpan—onion, carrot, turnip, celery, herbs—cover them with stock and place the beef on the top of them, put on the lid and let it boil; the pan may then be put in the oven and based now and again, or it may remain over the fire—it is best finished a few minutes in the oven; the stock should make a rich gravy; strain it and take away fat.

SAM.—Into a glass pipkin put two ounces of black soap, place it on a gentle fire, and when melted add three ounces of beeswax. When this is melted remove from fire and add half an ounce of fine lamp black and half a drachm of Prussian blue in fine powder. Stir all together till you get them perfectly mixed, then add sufficient spirits of turpentine to make a thin paste, and let it cool. For use apply a coat with a piece of linen rag evenly all over the harness, after which, to bring up a bright surface, polish with a soft polishing brush.

GINGER.—Try draining off all the liquor, put the fruit into one vessel, boil up sufficient plain vinegar to cover them well, pour it over them hot, stir them up a bit, then leave till next day when take another lot of fresh vinegar allowing in proportion to every quart of vinegar, one ounce each of black pepper, allspice and bruised ginger, boil for ten minutes, drain the walnuts free of the plain vinegar you used on the previous day, and when the freshly spiced vinegar has cooled to tepid, return the drained fruit to the jars and pour it over them.

MISTRESS PAUL.—Half pound salt fish, eight potatoes, one teaspoonful dripping, a little milk, half teaspoonful mustard, one teaspoonful vinegar, a little parsley, a little pepper; the fish should be soaked for a few hours in cold water, then remove the skin and put it on in a stewpan, covered with cold water, to boil for half an hour, or longer if necessary; pare and boil the potatoes and mash them, adding the milk to them; chop up the parsley finely; make the mustard with the vinegar; now put some potatoes in the bottom of a pie dish; then the fish broken into flakes, and free from bones; then the dripping in little bits; then the mustard spread as well as possible; then the parsley sprinkled; then cover all over with the remainder of the potatoes; make the top neat and smooth, and mark it with a spoon; put the pie in the oven, or before the fire to brown on the top.

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NOTICE.—Part 424, New Year, price Sixpence, post-free, Eightpence. Also Vol. LXVII., bound in cloth, 4s. 6d.

THE INDEX to Vol. LXVII. is now ready; Price One Penny, post-free, Three-halfpence.

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††† We cannot undertake to return rejected manuscripts.

DREAM LIFE.

In a long ago boat on a far-away sea

I sailed with my love—

It was ages ago—

Yet at times in my sleep comes the vision to me

How I sailed with my love

In the soft afterglow,

'Twixt the day and the night

In a dream of delight.

In our wide-awake world with our work-a-day schemes,

But a phantom seems love!

Yet in ages ago,

When I dwelt in a cloudland of rose-coloured dreams,

Nothing real more than love

In the soft afterglow,

'Twixt the day and the night

In a dream of delight.

And I hope—who shall say 'tis but fancy—'twill be

In a far away time

As in ages ago—

I shall float in my boat on that far-away sea

With my ever known love

In the soft afterglow,

'Twixt the day and the night

In a dream of delight.

RAHM MAH.—The expense of a marriage at the

registrars' office is seven shillings; it is equally binding

as one performed by a clergyman as far as the legality of

the proceeding goes.

SLEEPLESS ONE.—We have heard it positively asserted

that to drink a half pint of hot milk or hot water will

have the effect of producing sleep in eight cases out of

ten.

JUWO.—You may keep the dog if you like, but owner

can legally claim it again without payment should he

ever see it in your possession; police have nothing to do

with one.

ANXIOUS.—Such an operation belongs to the province

of a good surgeon. There is always more or less risk

attending any such removal, and great care is advised in

such undertakings.

LILY A. H.—Yes, you require two witnesses. The

foes you name are in most cases voluntary, and you

can ascertain of the parish clerk beforehand what it is

going to cost you. At certain seasons of the year no

foes are charged.

WALK EVERA.—Any trouble about the eyes demands

the attention of an oculist, and a competent one. There

are many diseases of the eyes that, if treated in time,

may be cured; but the eyes are too valuable to be trifled

with.

S. D. T.—The German language is spoken almost

exclusively throughout the German Empire, and also in

a large district of the Austrian Empire, but not in

Hungary—for instance, the larger part of Austria—not

in Dalmatia.

ONE WHO WANTS TO KNOW.—The "Printers' Bible"

is so called because it contains a curious typographical

error in the 161st verse of Psalm cix, which is made

to read, "Printers have persecuted me without a

cause," instead of "Princes."

PURY.—Beef is the most nutritious of all animal foods,

and can be eaten longer continuously than any other

kind of meat, resembling rice and bread in that respect.

Fresh beef is almost completely digested; more com-

pletely than milk is by an adult.

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DIGGING OUT A DEFINITION.

If I should ask you if you ever felt nervous in your life, you would no doubt answer, "Yes, many a time." Then if I should ask you to give me an accurate definition of the word "*nervousness*," how would you go at it? It looks easy enough. And so does jumping over a five-barred gate—when you see another fellow do it. The word is in everybody's mouth, and we don't think it necessary to consult the dictionaries as we pass it around. If you don't mind, we will hear what these two people have to say before committing ourselves to a final opinion.

"Up to the spring of 1888," says Mr. Alfred Hancock, "I was a healthy man. At that time, however, a depressed, *nervous* feeling came over me, and I grew very weak and feeble. I had a cold, too, and was altogether out of sorts. I was much troubled with acidity of the stomach, and after eating had weight and pain at the chest. Later, I suffered from the more severe ailment known as *nervous debility*. The doctor whom I consulted proved unable to relieve me. Some one then recommended Mother Seigel's Syrup, and I sent to Mr. Surfleet, the chemist, in Silver Street, for a bottle, and began taking it. On finishing that bottle I found myself much better. The pain after eating was easier, and I felt stronger for my food having agreed with me and digested. I was also much less *nervous*. After using three bottles I was in sound health, and have remained so ever since. (Signed) Alfred Hancock, Gainsborough, Lincolnshire, April 23rd, 1895."

"In July, 1894," says another, "I got into a low, queer way. I felt weak, heavy, dull, and unsettled, and *was very nervous*. I had no appetite, and what little food I took caused a curious sensation at the chest, not so much a pain as a worrying, *nervous* feeling. I had a gnawing pain at the pit of the stomach, and could find nothing to relieve it.

"At night my rest was broken, and I felt as tired in the morning as when I went to bed. Besides these things I suffered a good deal with pain and fluttering at the heart. At times I was so weak and exhausted I could hardly speak. A little later it was only by an effort I could get up and down stairs.

"None of the various medicines I tried seemed to do me any good. My mind became depressed, and I was so discouraged I was almost ready to give up doing anything more for myself. This was the state I was in about three months after I was taken ill.

"At that time (it was in October, I remember) Mrs. Lancaster, a neighbour of mine, told me what a lot of good Mother Seigel's Syrup had done her when she was ill, and she pressed me to try it. Following out her advice, I sent to Mr. G. Wilson's Drug Stores, in Bean Street, and got a bottle, and after taking it found myself much better. I could eat without any pain or fretting feeling about the chest, and food tasted right and agreed with me. As you will infer from this, I kept on with Mother Seigel's Syrup, and when I had used another bottle I was cured. All the *nervousness* was gone, and I was as well as ever. That is nearly six months ago now, and since then I have enjoyed steady, good health. I sleep well and bear life's cares as calmly as other healthy persons do. You are free to publish my letter if you wish to do so. (Signed) (Mrs.) Mary Ann Collinson, 2, Zion Terrace, Bean Street, Hull, April 2nd, 1895."

You will notice that in both these letters the words "*nervous*" or "*nervousness*," are printed in italic letters. The printer did this at my request, so you might see how much stress the writers lay on that idea. Yet, in both cases, it appears that as soon as Mother Seigel's Syrup had cured the indigestion or dyspepsia (the stomach trouble), the *nervousness* disappeared. We may conclude that the latter was in some way a result of the former. And such is the fact. The nerves, half-starved from the disease, become weak, jangled, and upset, and play their owners all sorts of disagreeable tricks. With returning health and strength the nerves are as vibrant and harmonious as the strings of a new grand piano. So let us wind up by a short definition: *NERVOUSNESS. — A symptom and consequence of dyspepsia.*

Our friends Mrs. Collinson and Mr. Hancock, have told us how to cure it.

LONDON READER

CHRISTMAS NUMBER

WITH No. 1753.—VOL. LXVIII.]

FOR THE WEEK ENDING DECEMBER 5, 1896.

[PRICE TWOPENCE.]

Give Thanks.

—O:—

Give thanks, give thanks,
Brave farmer,
For the wealth your barns display;
No sword gate guards earth's Eden,
And the ploughshare wins to-day!
You have garnered the blushing fruitage,
And have heaped the chaffless grain,
And every one this Christmastide,
Blesses your golden grain.

Give thanks, give thanks,
Rich merchant,
For this age of thought and steam;
The old world's gems and treasures
Are no wild-Aladdin dream.
Your ships were all full-freighted,
Where Eastern princes wait,
And have borne rich gifts this Christmas
From India's opulent gate.

Give thanks, give thanks,
Poor sailor:
For high o'er the billows' swell,
Even over the blast of storm's trumpet,
You can list home's silvery bell;
Riven spars and sails that are tattered
Are but the defeat of a day;
The year's crown is the blessing this Christmas
When you enter the silver-rimmed bay.

Give thanks, give thanks,
O, Christian:
For yours is the pathway of love!
Than the farmer's, or sailor's, or merchant's,
It is prized all paths above.
Give thanks for the toil that enriches,
For the flowers that brighten our life,
And thanks that our bright happy Christmas
Deals the death-blow for ever to strife.

Victoria Digby's Romance.

CHAPTER I.

"VICTORIA, they tell me it is snowing!" and Lady Charlotte Digby put the tip of a nose, which very much resembled a weasel's, half-an-inch beyond the mountain of blankets and eiderdowns with which she was covered, and looked anxiously at her niece. "You can't possibly go in such weather."

"I can't possibly stay away when Charlie has just come home. So good-bye, you dearest old fidget," putting her ruby lips to that tip of a nose, which was the only portion of her aunt's face at which she could get. "I'm not made of barley sugar, and I'm wrapped up to such an extent that I look the size of an alderman."

"But, child, what will your father say?"

"That Vic was not the sort of girl to be frightened by a snowflake. Good-bye, and a thousand, thousand thanks. I've not a moment, or I shall miss the train."

The next little figure in close-fitting dark brown ulster, sable tippet and sable toque, flew down the stairs; and with a wave of the hand and a cheery good-bye to the maid and the man who shivered on the doorstep, sprang into the brougham which was waiting at the door, and drove off to Paddington.

At the station porters volunteered remarks about the weather, so that she thought it must be rather worse than usual, but snarled down in the corner of a first-class carriage, with a hot-water tin under her feet, a warm fur rug over her knees, and her hands clasped together in the muff, which supported her novel—she did not trouble her mind much about it. For the first time in her life she was travelling alone, for her maid had fallen ill, and was obliged to be left behind in London; but she would not wait for an

escort, for her brother, Captain Digby, had come home for a fortnight's leave, and she could not waste a day of it.

The footman had been instructed to look out for a respectable elderly lady going the same way, and to place Miss Victoria in her charge; but this frigid morning there were few elderly ladies about, and the girl turned up her dainty nose in scorn at the only one suggested by James.

"I shall go by myself," she said, resolutely; and carrying her resolution into effect, before James could utter a remonstrance, climbed into an empty carriage.

At first, finding that there was nothing to be seen through the misty windows, she began to read her novel; but she had been to a party the night before, and at sweet seventeen living lovers have a way of intruding themselves between a pair of bright eyes and the page before them. A smile hovered every now and then round the pretty lips as she remembered a particularly smart repartee, but gradually her recollections became as misty as the window-pane, and people from her home in Devonshire were jumbled together in an uproarious "Sir Roger de Coverley" with the strangers she had met in Eccleston-square, and her own father seemed to be calling her to come away, when the long lashes fell on the rounded cheeks, and little Vic was fast asleep.

Whilst she was sleeping cosily amongst her wraps the weather had gone from bad to worse. It had never ceased to snow, and a violent wind blew the flakes hither and thither, blustering and roaring round the windows of the train. The sky, when visible, looked a murky grey, and the weather-wise shook their heads, saying they saw no hope of a change.

Still the train went on, further and further into the storm, the smoke of the engine looking black against the whiteness of the snow; but the pace grew slower as they proceeded westward, for the rails were getting so clogged that it was difficult and even dangerous to make way. Consultations were held at every station, but the guards and the engine-driver were determined to push on as quickly as possible, knowing well that the longer they delayed the more their difficulties would increase.

The engine puffed and made a great noise, but a white wall was slowly rising before it, and the carriages behind seemed to increase a hundredfold in weight. The pace altered from a run to a crawl, and the crawl languished into a gradual cessation of movement.

The passengers roused themselves up in a hurry, and one, who managed to get a window open by main force, bawled out a hoarse query as to what the deuce they were stopping for.

"Cos we can't go no further," said the guard, laconically.

"But we must," in a rage. "I tell you it is absolutely necessary for me to be in Exeter this evening."

A porter laughed derisively, and muttered,—

"Don't 'e wish 'e may git there;" but the guard answered, civilly, "It won't be by train, sir; the line's regular blocked."

"But something must be done. There ought to be a steam-plough. I never heard anything so disgraceful in my life."

"You see it took us all of a sudden, and there won't be steam-ploughs enough in England to satisfy us. You had better get out, sir."

"Get out? Dashed if I will! Do you want me to have rheumatics for life?" furiously.

The guard passed on along the slippery footboard, and threw open a door.

"You must get out, miss."

"Is this Exeter?" rubbing a pair of very large brown eyes.

"Lord bless you! Exeter's a hundred mile or more away!"

"But is it a station?" peering out into the storm, and seeing nothing but a to-ssing sea of white.

"Yes, miss, Orpington, it's close by; and the Rector, who's a gentleman down to the ground he is, has sent to say he'll take in as many of you as can't go anywhere else. I'll see after your things. Now hurry away."

"But I——" she began, hesitatingly.

He allowed her no time to think, but with hasty, kindly hands helped her on to the footboard.

"Creep along the board, miss. You are small, and there won't be any chance of another train coming by, and there you won't get your feet wet. I'll come after you as soon as I can."

He disappeared, and she was alone. The wind was like ice, and would soon turn her small body into an icicle if she stopped another minute to consider; so she climbed along the board as suggested, clutching hold of the handles of the carriage doors as she passed, till she reached the tender, and the platform of a station loomed in sight.

A friendly hand was stretched out to help her, and a kind voice told her to jump, which she did with the activity of a kitten, and reached the platform without succumbing into a bed of snow.

"What is to become of me?" she said, dolefully, to the red-faced old gentleman, who was stamping furiously to keep up his circulation.

He pulled down a grey comforter, far enough just to let out his gruff voice. "You'll be all right at the Rectory."

"But I don't know any one there."

"No matter; a roof over your head is the thing you want. You must go at once, or you'll be left behind."

He hustled her off, and she found herself attached to a small knot of passengers who looked like so many bundles of shivering rags, standing round a man who might be a gardener. "This way, mum," he called out, and started off with a stout stick in his hand. The rest straggled after him.

"Wait a bit!" cried the old gentleman. "Haven't you got a rug?"

She explained that she had left it in the carriage, and he sent a porter after it, saying, "Bless my soul, you would be frozen to death before you got there."

When at last it came he wrapped it round her, and took the pin out of his scarf to fasten it together. She begged him not to use it as it was sure to be lost, but he said, "Tut, tut. I fancy there's someone belonging to you who thinks you are worth more than a pin. Come along now; you must run as fast as you can; the porter says the road is as straight as a dart, so you can't mistake it."

"But you?"

"Oh, never mind me. I shall get back to London somehow, if I can't get forward. Good-day."

"Thank you so much," and she ran out into the snow, scarcely able to make head against the wind. As to seeing her way that was impossible, but she supposed if it was straight she would not go far wrong. To run was equally impossible, for the snow was already about eight inches deep, and clung to her boots like lumps of lead, wanting to pull her down to the ground.

She listened for the sound of voices, but the screaming of the wind in her ears made her deaf to everything else. Feeling very desolate she stumbled on, her movements clogged by the heavy rug which her unknown friend had insisted on wrapping round her.

"I wish it were at the bottom of the sea," she said, impatiently, as she came head foremost into a hedge, and could not free a hand to help herself. She picked herself up as best she could, and a rugged on imagining that she was still in the high road, and sooner or later would see the lights in the Rectory's house. Her petticoats were wet with the snow, and clung round her legs; and every step she took seemed to become more difficult, but with the hope of shelter not far off she strove to keep up her strength as well as her courage.

She thought of her old aunt in London, sitting over the fire, with the five o'clock tea-tray by her side, and the white cat curled up at her feet. She thought of Charlie—her handsome, yellow-haired soldier-brother who was coming to Exeter to meet her. He would have to drive back all by himself, and perhaps feel vexed and cross, imagining her safe in Eccleston-square, flirting, as she too often did, with one or two males who frequented the old maid's house when the young one happened to be there.

What would aunt or brother say if they knew that little Vic was alone in the cold, the dark, and the snow? Thinking how they would pity her she began to pity herself, till two large tears rolled down her cheeks, and her courage melted away. It was odd that she saw no house, and met nobody coming to look for her.

She raised her head and looked over the edge of the rug, which was stiff with her frozen breath. The snow was not falling quite so fast, so she was able to catch the outline of a gate, a few feet from her. She started first to right and then to left, opening her eyes in horror and bewilderment; there was a hedge close under the lee of which she was creeping, and another on the other side at each end of the gate.

She was not in the road but in a narrow lane, which might lead for miles over a snow-bound country. Instead of going towards shelter and warmth, and food, every step she had taken led her farther and farther from them.

With a little cry of despair she stood still numb with dismay. She had not strength to take her back again, and she had no more courage to help her to battle against difficulties. The early winter-night was closing round her, and there was no likelihood of any help coming to her, for no one knew she was lost, and without an adequate motive not a soul would stir from his own fireside on such a night as this.

She was young, and had no experience as yet of the hardships of life, so that her powers of endurance had never been tried. What wonder, then, that she succumbed; and weary in body and mind sank down in the snow, unable to drag her tired limbs a single step further.

One by one the white flakes fell over her, clothing her like a shroud, whilst the fatal sleep which is sure to end in death weighed down her eyelids, and pressed her long lashes on her tear-stained cheeks. Alas, for little Vic!

CHAPTER II.

"UNDER the stars, my darling!" whistled Captain Gerald Fane cheerily all to himself, undepressed by what he called "the beastly weather," as he made his way slowly homewards on his good horse Peter, followed by the groom.

He had come down from town by the half-past ten train, and gone

round by the Rectory to ask if some of the passengers could not be housed at The Beeches.

The Rev. Brian Mortimer, however, had refused to let any of them go, declaring that there was room under his hospitable roof for half-a-dozen more; so he had come away, and George had preferred to follow his master on foot, saying that there was more chance of circulating his blood by walking than by waiting for the dog-cart which had gone to fetch the luggage.

"What's the matter, old fellow?" patting Peter's neck, as he pulled up short, and refused to go any further. "Do you see anything, George?" stooping down and peering into the darkness.

"Good heavens, sir, there's a woman. I made sure it was a bundle, and nothing more," starting back as if in horror.

"Don't be a fool!" springing off his horse. "Hold her up; she must be frozen," feeling after an inner pocket where he had his flask. "Which is her face? I can't see. Here, strike a match," thrusting a box of cigarettes into his servant's hand.

George struck it as desired, and the faintest glimmer shone upon what looked like a mound of snow; but Gerald's sharp eyes discovered something more before the light went out, and the next moment his flask was pressed eagerly to the girl's pale lips.

"Don't be afraid, finish it up. Do you feel all right?" and he held out his hand to assist her to rise. Bound up in the rug as she was she could not take it, so he put out his strong arms, and lifted her bodily up from the ground, and on to the back of his horse. "Where have you come from?"

"The station. We were turned out," speaking slowly, as if half her faculties were frozen.

"Then I must take you to The Beeches at once. Good heavens, it is a wonder you are alive! Let me see," stopping to collect his thoughts.

"George, you go back to the station, and tell them to send this lady's baggage with mine."

"Don't know the lady's name," muttered the groom, not at all relishing the job.

"Victoria Digby," said a soft voice out of the darkness.

"Digby!" murmured Fane; "not the Digbys of Devonshire?"

"Yes, my home is there, and, oh! how I wish—"

"You were there as well? Never mind, we'll take care of you for a little while, and the snow can't last for ever."

There was something in his voice which attracted her irresistibly, and all her doubts and fears vanished at the sound of it. In after years she knew it was a cure for heartache or sorrow, and even now it gave her a comforting sense of kindness and protection. He plodded on by her side with cheerful patience, keeping one hand on her skirts so that he might save her from slipping, and making light of the difficulties they met with.

It was long before the lights of the comfortable house, which owned the name of The Beeches, came twinkling through the snow, and the eager bark of a dog sounded through the roar of the wind.

"There's Jock; he always gives me a welcome. Cheer up, Miss Digby, we shall be home directly."

"Your home, not mine," she said, regretfully.

"Yours, I haven't a doubt of it, just as long as you like to make it so," was the kindly rejoinder, as he threw open a gate which led into the private grounds.

The hall door was opened, and a stream of light poured out across the snow-bound garden like a warm welcome, at the same time that Jock came bounding down the steps, and rushed in frantic delight to his master.

He gave him a few pats on his shaggy head, and then turned his attention to his charge. He lifted her down very carefully, led her into the hall, where a large wood fire in an old-fashioned fireplace shed a ruddy light over the dark oak panelling, and, before the wondering eyes of the butler and footman unpinned the rug, and set her arms free.

As she stood before him in her ulster and sables his eyes rested on her small, rounded figure with a sense of satisfaction. Then he pulled off his hat, and made her a low bow.

"Miss Digby, I am delighted to make your acquaintance."

"Please will you give me my pin?" raising her eyes to his face for the first time, and smiling involuntarily as she met his glance.

"Let me keep it," he said, on a sudden impulse.

"Gerald, Gerald! Have you come? What are you doing? We have been so anxious about you."

A tall young lady, with smooth dark hair and a pale face came eagerly out of the library, but stood stock-still on perceiving that the brother whom she had been worrying about for the whole afternoon had not only arrived, but imported a strange girl, "with wild, dark eyes," with whom he was amusing himself after his usual fashion.

"Quite well?" kissing her, affectionately. "We are nearly frozen."

Then he made a step forward, as a stately-looking lady came to the door, and his father's grey head peeped over her shoulder.

"Mother"—after a hug—"let me give over to your care a certain treasure I found in the snow. Only think if it had not been for the mere chance of my coming that way she would have been frozen to death!"

Lady Fane came forward with outstretched hand, and the stranger was made welcome. She was taken into the library and nearly roasted alive, whilst Theresa divested her of her fur and coat, and rubbed her small fingers to make them warm.

There were several other people in the room, guests staying in the house, whom Gerald amused with the account of the perils and dangers they had been through; but Vic, thoroughly tired out, sat perfectly quiet, letting the

pleasant warmth steal through her veins, as she sipped a hot cup of tea, too lazy to make any remark.

Presently a bell sounded somewhere in the recesses of the house, and the visitors retired to dress for dinner.

Lady Fane got up from her seat, and laying her hand on the girl's shoulder, said, with her sweetest smile, —

"You have not told me by what name I am to call you?"

Gerald, who was talking with his father, looked round quickly, but left the stranger to answer for herself.

"Victoria Ermytrude Digby."

The smile vanished from Lady Fane's lips, and Theresa rose hastily from her knees.

Vic looked from one to the other with defiant eyes. What did these people mean by hating her name, as if it weren't as good as Fane or any other under the sun?

"Perhaps you live in London?" said Lady Fane, as if she hoped it.

"No, I come from Devonshire, and my home is Digby Court," drawing up her neck, and looking as dignified as she could, in spite of her dishevelled hair.

"I will leave you to show Miss Digby to her room," and Lady Fane sailed out of the library, followed by her husband.

"If you will excuse me," said Theresa, with grave politeness, "I will go and ask which it is, which will be better than keeping you waiting on the stairs;" and Vic was left alone in front of the fire, with her angry thoughts.

Ever since her babyhood she had been made to think that it was a special favour from Providence to have been born a Digby of Digby Court, and these people here actually seemed to regard it as a disadvantage!

Indignant tears welled in her eyes, and she looked hastily round the room, as if to find some mode of escape. The large bay window was shuttered, but the bar had slipped down instead of going into its fastenings, and the shutter was not closed. She ran to it eagerly, and put her small face close to the misty glass.

"What are you doing there?" said a voice close behind her.

She started violently, but still glued her face to the pane. "Is it snowing? That's all what I want to know."

"Yes, as if it had never snowed before. You'll have to stay here for the rest of your life."

"Thanks," with hot scorn. "I'm going away the first thing in the morning."

"Oh, are you?" with cool incredulity. "I don't know how you will manage it."

"Do you think I'd stay here?" stamping with her little high-heeled boot on the polished floor.

"I don't see how you can help it," with an amused smile on the frank, fair face.

"But I *will* help it. I won't—I can't stay!" her breast heaving, her lashes wet. "They hate my name."

"Who says so?" sternly.

"I know it."

Feeling that it was undeniably true, Gerald changed his ground. "We will forget the surname. What do they call you at home?"

"Little Vic," with a ghost of a smile.

"Little vixen. Ah! a capital name, and so very appropriate," his blue eyes twinkling with fun.

She drew herself up.

"You are extremely impertinent, and I think you are all horrid!" Then her dignity suddenly collapsed, and hiding her face in her hands she burst into tears.

She was hysterical, exhausted, and overwrought, and her tears became a tempest; but she only shook her shoulder angrily when he attempted in some clumsy way to comfort her, so he stood perfectly still, with folded arms, regarding her with a stare of dismay.

In a few minutes Theresa appeared, greatly to his relief; and after an anxious inquiry as to what was the matter, to which she got no intelligible answer, carried her off to bed.

CHAPTER III.

LADY FANE had reason to hate the name of Digby beyond every other under the sun, but she put away all feelings of prejudice when she heard that her involuntary guest was ill, and treated her with every possible kindness.

In spite of the snow, which kept them imprisoned, she managed to send for the doctor, and was relieved to hear that if Miss Digby remained in bed for a few days, and was kept very warm and quiet, it was not likely that any serious harm would result from her adventure.

Two days passed in forced inaction, but on the third she got up, washed herself with the freezing water in her jug, dressed herself in her ulster and furs, and stole softly down the stairs.

They had been kind to her, but she felt certain they looked upon her in the same light as Jews of old looked on Samaritans, and she was determined to get out of the house as soon as possible.

As it happened there was no one in the large hall, where the fire was crackling cheerily. She looked at it longingly, for her fingers were blue with cold, but not daring to linger lest she might be stopped, she went straight to the front door and opened it.

An icy blast came into eyes and mouth, and she nearly choked in strangling

a cough, but she stepped out into the cold with a shiver, and shut herself out in the snow.

A cheerful gleam came from the hall window, but she turned her face resolutely away, and started at a run down the carriage-drive. It was sheltered from the house by clumps of evergreens, and later on by an avenue of beeches which showed white and tall against the dull grey sky.

The snow had been swept away from the drive, so that she was able to walk fast, but her legs felt weak after lying in bed, and her breath seemed taken away by the frosty air.

The avenue went in a curve, so that the end was hidden from the beginning, and she had no idea that any one was near till she ran straight into his arms.

"Miss Digby!" in amazed astonishment, as Gerald Fane took the cigar out of his mouth, and the hat off his close-cropped head. "What are you doing here?"

"Going away," trying to look defiant.

"Does my mother know of this?" sternly.

"No," tossing her head; "but you needn't be afraid—she will be glad to be rid of a Digby."

"As to that, I know she has tried to be kind to you, and the first time you are able to move about you do your best to insult her."

"Insult her?" opening wide her dark brown eyes.

"Yes," looking down his nose at her, and speaking through his set teeth; "if we had starved and ill-treated you, you couldn't do more than sneak away."

She hung her head.

"I thought they would be glad."

"They are not savages."

"But it chokes me to eat a bit of bread in your house," with something like a gasp. "I never was hated before."

"We don't hate you, but there was a Digby once who brought shame on a name that had never known it before, and we've no reason to like the race."

"Are you sure?" in an awed whisper. "It couldn't have been one of us."

"It was your father's brother," shortly.

"Then he couldn't have been like papa," hiding her head, her dark eyes shining.

"Perhaps not," with a slight smile. "Now are you coming back? Remember, you are free to go; you can get to the Rectory, but not to your home."

He stood aside as if to let her pass, and as soon as the way was open the inclination went in her perverse little mind. She looked hesitatingly up and down, and gave a little shiver.

"If you go now we shall think there is little to choose between the Digbys of the present generation and the past." So saying, he drew himself up, straight and tall as a poplar, his eyes fixed resolutely on her drooping face.

"Take me back!" she said, coaxingly, going close up to him like a child.

"You won't do it again!"

"Never again."

The sunny smile came back to his lips, and he drew her hand within his arm, holding it for a moment tight in his own.

"Wasn't I right to call you a vixen?"

Why was it that her heart fluttered like a frightened bird's, and for the first time in her life she hadn't a word to say?

"Gerald is the biggest flirt in creation, never believe a word he says;" and Colonel Fane, a cousin who was staying in the house, leant back on a brown velvet sofa, his head of short, black curls, very near another, which he considered the prettiest in the room.

He had everything to delight the heart of woman, a handsome face, a deferential bearing (now and then), a musical voice, and a reputation for fastness.

As an officer in the —th Guards he passed most of his time in London, and after all the fashionable beauties without a blush or a feeling, it was refreshing to him to come across a little girl, whose pretty face a bold glance could dye with crimson, and whose heart seemed often to peep out of her soft brown eyes. Besides, she was a Digby of Digby Court, the wealthiest family in Devonshire, and money gave a flavour to country simplicity.

"He is to marry his cousin, Lady Maude, some day, if she will have the battered thing he calls a heart."

"Is he in love with her?" looking across the room to where Captain Fane was standing by the side of a girl with a yellow sash.

"My dear Miss Digby, he is in love with every girl he comes across. Fact, I can assure you."

"And what would he say of you?" with a swift glance into his good-looking face.

"Of me?" he shrugged his shoulders. "At least he couldn't say that the name of Digby would warn me off," and he turned to her with his most fascinating smile.

It was as if a stab had gone right through her heart. Gerald would never — never care to do more than amuse himself with her because of this absurd prejudice, and she had grown to watch his looks and words as if her life depended on them. She would rather die than he should guess it, she thought to herself, as she crushed a white camellia to death in her hand.

"You have spoilt your flower," said the man by her side, and he took the tuberoses from his button-hole and laid it on her lap.

She looked at it doubtfully, feeling inclined to pick up the brown withered leaves of the other which Gerald had given her, if she could have done it in stealth.

"He is coming to ask for this dance; say you are engaged to me," said the Colonel, in a hurried whisper.

Fane came towards her, looking happy and confident, as if refusal were the last thing he dreamt of. "This is our waltz; I hope Douglass has not made you forget it," and he held out his arm.

"I think you are mistaken," unfurling her fan.

"Not a bit of it. I wrote your name down on my only programme. Would you like to see it?" he asked, with a mischievous smile, as he showed her the "Vixen" scrawled on his wrist-band.

"If you call me that I'll never dance with you again!" and the blood rushed into her cheeks.

"Especially as this is mine," Colonel Fane remarked, with a languid smile, as he stood up, offering his arm. "Now, go away, my dear fellow, you are not wanted here."

The frank faces grew suddenly serious.

"Is this true?" looking down at Vic with grave eyes.

"Quite true," she answered viciously, because of the pain in her heart. "Your cousin is ten times politer than you are."

Without a word he went away, and leant against a wall with a stern face and folded arms, and it seemed to Vic as if the sun of her life had gone behind a cloud.

The next moment Colonel Fane's arm was round her waist, and to the music of "Under the Stars" they glided together round the room. It was very delightful, but her legs seemed to fail her, and her heart grew like a stone. This was the tune which he was whistling when he came to her rescue in the snow.

If it weren't for him she would be dead—cold and stiff, buried in the cruel, grasping snow—and no one would have guessed what had become of her, and Charlie would have gone mad with grief, and her father and mother would have felt their home desolate for ever.

"Aren't you well?" asked the Colonel, quickly, looking into her white face, and the next moment he almost carried her into a small room leading out of the drawing-room.

"Don't tell me that you care for him," bending over her eagerly, as he threw himself down by her side. "I thought you were at daggers drawn."

"And so we are," panting and breathless, her hand pressed to her aching heart.

"If you are, there is hope for me. He is the only rival I am afraid of, in spite of Lady Maude."

"He thinks I like Gerald, and he knows that he doesn't care. Good Heaven, what am I coming to!" she asked herself, breathlessly. "Anything but that!" Then she looked up into the Colonel's face with her lovely eyes. "Men are deceivers ever—why should I trust you more than him?"

"Because he has a father, mother, and sister, beside a Lady Maude; and, excuse me if I sound rude, but they would rather be picked a girl out of the gutter than one out of Digby Court, whilst I have nothing to consult but my own heart, which you stole from me, dearest, the first night you came."

Her lips were white, and her knees shook. What he said was true, but she would rather have been deaf for life than have heard it. Then she summoned all her courage and said with a smile, "You are going rather far, Colonel Fane."

"Am I? I couldn't help it. You are a little witch, and madden me. You don't hate me, do you?" leaning over her with his most irresistible smile.

"Perhaps. I am not quite sure!" trying to be saucy.

"You've got my flower and my heart, and you are making me lose my head. What do you want more?"

"I want you to take them back," snatching the tuberose from her breast.

"I'll take this because you've worn it," pressing it to his lips; "the other I leave in pledge, hoping for yours in its place."

"You won't get it," springing to her feet, because he had come so close that she felt his breath on her cheek.

"I shall, unless Gerald has cheated me out of it," looking her straight in the face with eyes that glowed.

"I hate him!" and she stamped her foot, feeling at the moment as if it were really true.

A hand drew back the curtain which divided the one room from the other, and as quickly let it fall, but not before she caught a glimpse of blue eyes that flashed, and hair that shone like the sun.

Her face fell, and her head drooped. Colonel Fane, smiled, mockingly.

"Prove it. Don't give him another dance to-night. Give them all to me."

She was foolish and impulsive, and half-mad with pain, but she saw the open snare before her and knew it was time to draw back.

"No," with a small smile, "that would be getting out of one hole into another. Take me back to the drawing-room?"

Gerald did not come near her till the last, when he said, in a low voice,—

"One waltz isn't too much to ask."

"Too much when I am tired out," she said, because Colonel Fane was watching her; and then, as he turned away with his head in the air, she nearly sprang after him, and asked him to come back.

"My dear child, you look very ill," said Lady Fane, kindly.

"Yes, I am going to bed," and she cried herself to sleep, whilst Lady Maude was still laughing and talking with the man she meant to marry.

CHAPTER IV.

Vic sat by the fire on a low stool, and, with a letter from home in her lap, idly watched the play of the flames. It was a comfortable room, where the Fanes usually breakfasted when there was only the home party in the house, with plenty of low chairs with stuffed seats, warm rep curtains to keep out the draught from the bay windows, and a high carved mantelpiece of dark oak.

The door opened, and Captain Fane's voice said,—

"Are the others out, Miss Digby?"

Vic started, and needlessly flushed crimson.

"Yes; Lady Fane has gone to the village, and the rest wanted to see if there were any chance of skating."

He was turning away, when his eye fell on the letter resting on her knee.

"Heard from home?"

She nodded.

"There's a message for you in it. Could you wait one moment just to tell me what I had better do?" with shy eyes raised to his for a moment.

"Certainly," with grave politeness, so unlike the merry good-humour with which he addressed her at first; "but I don't suppose my advice is worth much."

Coming up to the fireplace he leant his arm on the mantelpiece, and waited.

"Papa tells me to thank you from the bottom of—"

"Pshaw! I thought you wanted to ask me something?"

"So I do, but my people are very grateful to you. They seem to—to think you did them a service."

"It was all Peter. I should never have seen you, but he wouldn't go by."

"My mother says that as the road is still blocked up by a huge drift I had better go back to my aunt in London."

A silence, during which she listened to the beating of her own heart, and wondered if he heard it too.

He pulled his fair moustaches as if in deep thought, and then said, abruptly,—

"Do you want to know the trains?"

Not a word of regret or remonstrance; she might go when she chose, he would not care to stop her now.

With a lump in her throat she mumbled "Yes," and began to pull nervously at the fringe of the hearthrug.

He turned his head and looked at her with softening eyes, but she did not know it, because she was staring dully at the carpet. What a little thing she was, and how prettily her soft curls grew round her forehead! What had become of her passionate temper? and was it Douglass that had tamed her so soon?

"When would you like to go?" in a matter-of-fact tone, as he told himself that it was no concern of his.

"Oh, I don't know," with a glance over her shoulder out of the window at the grey clouds scudding past before the blustering wind.

"You are not in such a hurry as you were the other day," with some sarcasm in his tone.

"Yes I am," springing to her feet with such activity that she brought on a fit of coughing. "I will write to my aunt to expect me to-morrow."

"Speak to my mother first."

"Why? She won't want to keep me," her colour rising.

"Oh, just as you like," and he walked away.

A little while ago he would have laughed and called her a little vixen. How she hated his politeness, and longed for him to be rude again.

"By-the-bye, you wanted to know the trains," stopping at the door; "there is one at 10.45, another at 12.50, a third at 3.10. The first would be the best, I should think, and the brougham, of course, will take you to the station." Then he shut the door behind him.

It is strange how much a little opposition increases the pleasure of having one's own way. Now that Vic could sit down and tell her aunt that she was coming all desire to leave The Beeches had departed from her.

Captain Fane had not only told her the trains, but had fixed upon the very earliest as the best for her to go by, as if to intimate that the sooner she was gone the better he would be pleased.

Her pride caught fire, and she dashed off a letter, telling Miss Digby to expect her to luncheon on the morrow. While she was writing she heard the voices of the would-be skaters outside the window, and soon afterwards the sound of their footsteps in the hall, as the men divested themselves of their wraps, and the ladies went upstairs to prepare for luncheon.

Presently a dark head appeared in the doorway, and Colonel Fane, after a glance round the room, came up to the fire rubbing his hands and shivering.

"Nice and comfortable you feel in here. It's fearful outside."

"What about the skating?" looking round with her pen in her hand.

"Impossible at present; but we've hired half-a-dozen men to clear away the snow, and I expect it will be all ready in two or three days. Won't it be charming? I am sure you would skate divinely."

"My father does not like me to try in London."

"In London? I dare say not, but here they needn't admit any but their own private friends. It will be a case of 'you and I together,'" with a smile, "and just a few to look on and admire."

"I am going away to-morrow," determined to get an expression of regret from somebody.

She was not disappointed, for the Colonel's face fell like a boy's when cheated out of a treat.

"You shan't go!" he said, almost fiercely. "You must be joking!"

She shook her head, a thrill of delight running through her, and her eyes beginning to sparkle.

He came to her, and laid his hand on the back of her chair.

"You don't want to leave me?"

She put up her eyebrows saucily.

"Why not?"

"Because I think you don't hate me."

"Then you are very much mistaken."

"I don't think I am," with another smile.

"Would you mind holding your tongue for a minute, as I wish to finish this letter?" her eyes fixed demurely on the sheet of paper.

"Is it to say you are going? Then I'll throw it into the fire," snatching it up from the table.

"Colonel Fane," her eyes flashing; "give it me back directly!"

He held it laughingly above his head.

"Not till you've promised to stay."

She shook her head, but could not speak for coughing, leaning on the back of the chair for support.

"It would be madness for you to travel with such a cough as that!" real concern in his voice. "Listen to me one moment. Stay till the end of next week, and then I'll escort you in any direction you want to go."

"You are very good, but I think after knowing you for these few days I should scarcely like to trust myself with you for an escort."

"Have I offended you?" looking penitent.

"I don't know what you think I am made of!" she cried, in a sudden passion.

"Sugar and spice, and all things nice, I believe," with a glance of morry deprecation.

"You forget that I'm a Digby," throwing back her head.

"Indeed, I don't; but I assure you I don't mind it."

"Mind it?" breathlessly, as if amazed at his audacity.

"Not a bit. I never heard that the sins of an uncle were to be visited on nieces. I would just as soon you were a Digby as anything else."

Her eyes opened wide, her breath was quite gone—she could not do anything but drop him a scornful curtsy.

"I've knocked about the world too much to have any prejudices left," he went on coolly; "and," with a hasty softening of his voice, "I should never let them interfere with my happiness."

"Too kind of you to say so," in withering scorn.

"I don't want you to put me in the same box as Gerald. Here's your letter, and I know you'll alter it to please me."

"Of course I shall!" sitting down at the table with a grave face, and writing a few words as fast as she could. The luncheon-gong sounded just as she had written the address, and taking the envelope in her hand she dropped it into the letter box in the hall.

"My dear, you can't go," said Lady Fane, shaking her head, as she heard a smothered cough. "I would not let you out of the house for the world."

"But I've often had a cough before, and I've written to say I'll come," and Vic glanced out of the corner of her eyes at a tall form by the window.

"We can easily telegraph now that the wires are mended," remarked Colonel Fane, as he lounged at his ease in the most comfortable armchair in the room.

"Yes, you must really stay," said Theresa, gently; "unless you have some great attraction in London, and even then we couldn't let you go."

Vic looked from one to the other, doubting, whilst Gerald kept an obstinate silence.

"My only attraction," she said, hastily, "is a dear old aunt, who is sure to give me a welcome."

"I fancy you would get that anywhere," in a half-whisper from the Guardsman.

"But surely you know that you are welcome here!" said Lady Fane, kindly.

"Am I?" with wistful, appealing eyes, which brought her hostess out of her chair, and half-way across the room to kiss her. Now that she was sure that the daughter of the Hon. Lionel Digby had given her heart to her nephew instead of her son, her hospitable soul warmed towards her, and she longed to pet and make much of her.

"Write your telegram, and I'll take it to the post."

It was Gerald who spoke, and, without the slightest sign of her former perversity, Vic did as she was bid.

"Thanks. I'm too utterly grateful," murmured the Colonel, as his cousin pocketed the telegram, and Vic returned to her seat.

Theresa smiled and looked from one to the other.

"I told you so," she whispered in her brother's ear; but he shook her off impatiently, and growled out that Douglass was "always fooling."

The next morning he mentioned at breakfast that he was obliged to be off to Aldershot, but he would return in a few days.

Vic thought he was going without a good-bye, and sat in the breakfast-room listening to every sound.

"Poor Maude is out of spirits to-day," said Theresa, with a smile. "We shall have to do our best to cheer her till somebody comes back."

"Is she engaged to your brother?"—the soft voice was unusually hoarse, but of course that was on account of her cold.

"Not exactly, but I suppose it is sure to come off. Mother would break her heart if Gerald married into a family she did not like. I begin to think

he has gone off from the stable yard, so I shan't wait any longer. Good-bye. You must be so tired of being shut up," and with a kindly nod Miss Fane hurried away for her morning walk.

Had he really gone? Steps came quickly along the hall, and a hand was laid on the handle of the door. Her heart beat so fast that it nearly stifled her, and she fixed her eyes intently on her book.

"Good-bye, Miss Digby," he was standing close by her before she would look up. "I am afraid I'm disturbing you."

"I like this book very much," she said, confusedly.

"Then I will leave you to enjoy it," already turning away.

"But I'm sick to death of reading," with an impatient sigh, "and I—I want to talk."

He smiled, and was there ever a smile that looked so much like a gleam of sunshine?

Douglass is in the billiard-room, so you can have as much of that as you like. Shall I find you here when I come back?"

"No," her eyes bent on the floor.

"Then good-bye. I wish we had been better friends. I suppose you won't mind shaking hands?"

She put her hand into his, feeling as if all her energies must be bent on stopping the cry which rose to her lips. "Stay, oh! stay!"

"You are shivering with cold," his kind eyes lingering on that small bent head and those clustering curls. "You must sit close to the fire, or we shall have you ill."

Then she heard his steps retreating, yet dared not raise her eyes because of the tears that were in them. He was going away, and she would never see him again. Oh! Heaven! what could she say to stop him, if only for sixty seconds!

"My pin," she cried, hoarsely; "you have never given it back to me."

"Are you sure you want it?" slowly unbuttoning his ulster. "I hoped you had forgotten it."

Then he stooped so as to catch sight of her face, drew a deep breath, and with three rapid strides was by her side.

"Vic, you are crying!"

His arm was round her, his face close to hers, and for a moment she shook from head to foot. Then with a violent effort she struggled for composure and pushed his arm away.

"Can't you see? I want to get home," she said, fiercely.

He stood up with a sigh, placed his hand gently on her curls, as if soothing a naughty child, and without a word left the room.

When she heard the hall door clang behind him then she laid her head on her knees, and sobbed as if her heart would break.

CHAPTER V.

"How bad your cold is, your eyes look quite inflamed!" said Lady Fane, looking at her young guest in a motherly manner as they sat at luncheon.

"Miss Digby wants exercise," said the Colonel, regarding her blushing face with the keenest interest, and wondering if she could possibly have been crying because of Gerald's departure. "I propose a game of 'Blindman's Buff.'"

The proposition was applauded, and orders were immediately given that a fire should be lighted in the ball-room, where there was plenty of space and very little furniture.

There the whole party gathered, with the exception of the elders, and from the shouts of laughter that rang through the closed doors the game seemed to be succeeding admirably.

Vic threw herself into the amusement, childish as it was, with her usual abandon, and went flying about the room, with lovely flushed cheeks and parted lips.

A cough is a most troublesome thing when you do not want to be recognized; but the blindmen in turn felt it a useful auxiliary, and Miss Digby's name was shouted out more often than any other.

Colonel Fane, with bandaged eyes and outstretched arms, was pursuing her with untiring eagerness, whilst she flitted from one corner to another, determined not to be caught by him, because the others would be sure to laugh.

Lady Maude Aston was a solid girl, whose movements were about as agile as an elephant's. Vic tried breathlessly to get behind her into a safe corner, but she stuck in the way, and the Blindman's hand clutched her shoulder, as she tried to evade him by kneeling on the ground.

His moustaches twitched with an amused smile, as his hand wandered in pretended doubt over the soft curls, and hesitatingly touched the blushing cheeks.

"Say who it is!" cried the others, impatiently; but a small voice whispered "Don't!"

He bent his head eagerly.

"Six dances to-night!"

An almost imperceptible nod was the answer.

Then he stood upright, and owned to be puzzled.

"I think it must be Theresa, only she has fuddled up her hair for the occasion."

A shout of laughter, and the captive was released, her lashes glued to her rosy cheeks.

"He wouldn't have let off anyone else," laughed Theresa.

"He couldn't help it if he guessed wrong."

"None so blind as those who will not see; the bandage was quite de-

trap. It's always the same with Gerald and Maude. He pretends not to know her because she hates being blinded, but he's not quite so cool as Douglas—taking an inventory of your features first."

"That's the best part of the game," laughed a Mr. Sydney Merton, who had just arrived. "Fane was a lucky dog."

"Don't like him," murmured Theresa. "As the house is full we have to put him in Gerald's room, and it seems quite desecration."

"But your brother is coming back on Thursday."

"He may, but I don't expect him. The blue room, down those steps, just beyond yours, must be got ready for him in case he should come before the other turns out. You look so tired; shan't we slip away?"

Vic readily assented, and was glad to be carried off to five o'clock tea in the library; but just as she had comfortably curled herself up in a corner of the sofa the others came trooping in, and Colonel Fane at once secured a place beside her.

"Why did you run away?"

"Because I was tired."

"Tell me why you cried this morning?" lowering his voice.

"What is that to you?" trying to look defiant, in spite of her burning cheeks.

"Everything," he said, softly; "tell me?"

If she refused to answer he would think she had been crying for a man who did not care whether she were alive or dead.

"I was cross and out-of-sorts," she said, quietly, as she stirred her tea. "Only leave me alone for a little while, and I shall be all right to-night."

"I'm to consider myself dismissed?"

She nodded.

"But why? Have I offended you?"

"You've been very cool."

"Have I?" looking straight into her eyes. To night I'll be as hot as fire."

And he kept his word.

A wild and reckless spirit suddenly took possession of Vic, and she was the merriest of them all in the evening. Colonel Fane devoted himself to her, and she so carelessly danced with anyone else, but whenever he tried to be tender she laughed in his face.

Bewitchingly pretty, with her flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, she bewildered and dazzled him at the same time, and he swore that he would win her whether she loved him or not. He was used to easy conquests among women, and it was not likely that a country coquette could baffle him; but she gave him more trouble than anyone else had done before.

"I don't believe you've got a heart!" he said, fiercely, as soon as he had decoyed her with some difficulty into that cosy little boudoir, where flirtations grow naturally under the shade of the palm-plants, in their pretty china pots.

"I am sure I don't know. I never wanted it," composedly, unfurling a large red fan.

"But supposing I do?" raising his glowing eyes to her imperturbable face. "What then?"

"I must leave you to find out," with a grave bow, as if the subject concerned someone else, and she did not mean to meddle with it. "Let us go back to the drawing-room?"

"Not yet. Vic, you shall not trifle with me."

"My name is Miss Digby."

"I know it, but you are Vic to me—Vixen to Gerald," with a smile.

"What I am to him is no concern of yours," her eyes flashing angrily.

"I don't agree with you. It kept me awake the whole of one night—thinking of it."

A great fear came over her, and her pride caught fire once again.

"If you want to know he hates me, and we never mean willingly to meet again."

His handsome face lighted up. "You mean it?" his eyes fixed on hers as if they would read to the bottom of her heart.

She met his glance resolutely, but he little guessed the effort it cost her.

"Of course I do; he hates the name of Digby; and I," stammering and confused—"I owe him my life, and I am sorry I do."

He caught her hand and pressed it to his lips passionately. "Then there is nothing between us."

A quiver came over the lovely face, her lips opened, but no sound came from them.

Then his arm stole softly round her neck, and with a long deep breath of fervent desire he drew her gently towards him. "My own, my queen," he murmured, and his eager lips sought hers.

Before they met she wrenched herself away with heaving breast and flashing eyes, and stood up, every pulse beating with indignation.

"Colonel Fane, I thought you were a gentleman!"

"So I am," throwing back his head, proudly; "and the love of an English gentleman is no disgrace to anyone."

"Love do you call it?" leaning against the crimson curtain, which being drawn back hung down by the wall, forming a dark background for the slight figure draped in white; "when they say in London that you give it to every girl you come across?"

"Let them talk their heads off; it's all a pack of lies. Vic, you won't believe them, darling. I swear you are the very first—"

"I'm only a simple country girl, and of course it is easy to take me in. I suppose you have said this to heaps of others?"

He smiled.

"If I have, I never meant it before. I could die for you, darling, but I can't live without you; indeed I can't," holding out his hands, his eyes speaking for him more eloquently than his tongue.

She turned away, pale and trembling.

"Oh, if Gerald had only said it!" she thought to herself, "I must have jumped into his arms. Why isn't it he instead of the other?" Then she tried to laugh. "Colonel Fane, you do it very well, but I—I'm young, and I don't understand it."

"You shall understand it fast enough!" fiercely, for his passion was rising at her mocking tone.

"Thanks, I had rather not," and she slipped away from his detaining hand into the full light of the drawing-room lamps. There out of danger, she threw him a coquettish glance over her shoulder. "Shall I get someone else to finish the dance?"

In an instant he was by her side, his arm round her waist, his face turned to meet hers.

"Gerald was right, you are a little Vixen."

"Then why do you trouble yourself about me?" forcing herself to smile, though the tears were near her eyes.

"Because I mean to tame you before I've done."

"Indeed!" with a toss of her head; "you'll find it rather difficult."

"I think they are engaged, mamma," said Theresa, in a low voice. "And, after all, it will be a good thing for Douglas to settle down. I always thought he'd run off with an actress."

"If Gerald had married a Digby I should have broken my heart," said Lady Fane, with a sigh; "but she's a dear child. I must send her off to bed, she looks so tired."

"Humph!" muttered Sir Gilbert Fane; "a Digby's fortune covers a multitude of sins, and Douglas is wide-awake."

Thursday came, the fire was lighted in the blue-room, and as the chimney had not been used for some time it resented this infraction of its usual habits, and sent clouds of smoke down the adjacent corridors.

"Fortunate that Gerald has not come, or he would have been smoked out," said Theresa, as she escorted Miss Digby to her room.

Vic gave a glance at the out-of-the-way corner down two or three steps, at the end of a short passage in which the blue-room was situated, and felt angry with Mr. Merton for turning Captain Fane out of his own.

"Won't he object to being turned out?"

"Not a bit. He's the most good-natured soul alive—not like other men who keep their bad tempers for home-consumption, and are never civil except to strangers. Good-night, pleasant dreams."

Is it pleasant to think that Paradise is outside a closed door which you may not open? Is it pleasant to think that you have placed all your wealth in a ship that is sure to founder? Is it pleasant to know that though you are young, and the road of life stretches far before you, every step you take leads you further from the joy you met and lost as soon as it was known? If so, Victoria Digby had no excuse for the tears which hung like dew-drops on her long lashes.

She had a horror of bed, where she had tossed uneasily the night before, unable to sleep for the first time in her life; so she sat in an armchair watching the blazing fire, which seemed to darken and grow gloomy in sympathy with her clouded face.

She heard the doors shut one after the other, as the men came up from billiard or smoking-room and went off to their different bed-rooms; and then quietly settled down on the well-ordered house, and she seemed to herself to be the only person awake in it.

She was just falling into a doze when her attention was attracted by the sound of wheels. Half-asleep she forgot to be surprised, but a moment later she sprang out of the chair, and ran to the window. Opening the shutter as quickly as she could she caught sight of the back of a dog-cart whisking round the corner. It must be Gerald Fane driven over from the junction.

Her foolish heart beat with joy, as she presently heard steps pass her door, and go along the passage to the blue-room. The dog-cart went round by the stable-yard, and he had let himself in with his own latch-key, so she was probably the only person in the house who knew of his arrival.

With the absurdity of first-love she felt proud of this small fact, and began to undress herself with a smile on her lips. At least she would see him once before she went away.

Putting all her troubles on one side she laid her dark head upon the snow-white pillow, and promptly fell asleep. How long she had slept she could not tell, when she was startled out of curious dreams by a hand laid roughly on her shoulder. Theresa was bending over her with a white face and startled eyes.

"Get up at once, the house is on fire!"

CHAPTER VI.

Is there any other monosyllable in the English language which sends such a thrill through heart and brain as that small word "Fire!"

Vic sat up with wide-open eyes and mute tongue, pushing back her hair, whilst Theresa uttered her directions as quickly as she could.

"Scramble into your clothes, and catch up everything valuable that you can lay your hands on, and remember the cold outside. I must go and see after the others."

"But where is the fire?" shaking with cold and terror as she got into her clothes with all the speed possible.

"In the smoking-room. Thank Heaven! Gerald didn't come."

"But he did," cried Vic, as Theresa ran out of the room wrapped in a blanket.

There was a throng of maids outside crying and shivering, with bundles in their hands of anything they valued most. The housekeeper had got a silver teapot under her arm, the lady's-maid a heap of false hair, the housemaid a favorite jackdaw in a cage, and the cook her Sunday bonnet.

Miss Fane hurried them off with a good-natured,—

"Don't be frightened; the front staircase is all right. What's that?" as a loud noise came from the end of the corridor.

"Only Lady Maude in hysterics," said Colonel Fane, with a smile, as he led his aunt away. "I'll come back and fetch her and Miss Digby."

"Miss Digby knows; I told her myself. "John"—meaning the groom—"ought to be back by this time."

"The engine could not come without the men, but I'll get the gardeners together and see what we can do for ourselves. Just you take your mother to the Rectory."

"Not for the world. Where's papa?"

"In the library, of course, saving the books."

"I'll go to him, mother dear, bear up, we shall save most of the things."

"Never mind the things," with a sob. "Tell Sir Gilbert to come out at once. I know he'll be burnt to death."

"I'll see after him. Here, Maude, come and take care of my mother. Just sit down on that sofa, and don't stir," depositing Lady Fane on one of the ruby satin couches which had been placed on the top of a flower-bed.

Lady Maude, white and helpless, sank down by the side of her hostess, looking like a white cow, wrapped up in a counterpane.

"My diamonds—my beautiful necklace and bracelets—they'll all be lost!" she sobbed.

Colonel Fane was here, there, and everywhere, doing the work of half-a-dozen. He had collected all the men in the place, broken the ice on the pond where they had skated the day before, formed a cordon from the bank over the snowy garden to the house, and buckets were filled and passed from hand to hand as quickly as possible.

"You are sure everyone is out of the house?" he called out to Theresa, who was working harder than most of the men.

"Yes, yes."

"I don't see Miss Digby anywhere," looking round anxiously.

"She must be all right. I told her myself," and Theresa hurried away, followed by a band of villagers who had come up to help.

It was a curious sight, the large country house standing black against the sky except where it was lit up by a lurid glare; the gardens filled with oddly dressed people, and odds-and-ends of furniture, priceless treasures thrown on feather beds; huge mirrors, which had been dragged down from the walls of the ball-room, glittering like sheets of ice, and catching strange reflections from rose-red sky and figures flitting past; silver urns gleaming like lost lamps, tables, cabinets, and books all tossed about on the snow-covered grass, where they had been thrown by hands hastening in order that more could be saved.

Lady Fane sat perfectly still, with her jewel-box on her lap, placed there by her nephew. Lady Maude continued her lamentations, and would not be comforted till her maid ran up with the missing diamonds safely stowed in her bible-case.

The fire was spreading rapidly, and a sob rose in Theresa's throat as she thought how her beloved home was doomed. Would the engine never come? "Thank Heaven, Gerald wasn't here!" she ejaculated fervently, trying to remember some blessings among what seemed so many evils.

"Why?" said Colonel Fane, in surprise, as he passed an empty bucket down the chain.

"Look there!" pointing to the blackened windows of the smoking-room; "he was to have slept in the blue-room, and he mightn't have been warned in time."

"Ah! and that's just over it. Hurrah! here they come!"

Ahead of the engine came the groom at a frantic pace. He torned his horse's head to the place where he saw his young mistress standing, and pulling him up short, pointed wildly to the house.

"The captain! the captain! where is he?"

His face was like death, his voice so hoarse that she could hardly understand what he said, and the hand that held the reins was shaking visibly.

Theresa looked at him wonderingly, and laid her hand pityingly on the horse, which was panting so pitifully as if it must burst its lungs.

"All right, thank you, John. He's safe at Aldershot."

"Oh, Heaven! he's at home," and with a groan almost like the growl of a wild beast he flung himself off the horse, and ran towards the house.

"At home!"

Like a stab of ice the fatal news shot through her heart, which had been lulled to rest in fancied security. As if rooted to the spot, she stood stock still, her brain in a whirl, her hand pressed to her temples.

Gerald there when she thought him far away! If there, why hadn't he come out? No one could have slept through the noise. Why wasn't it he who gave the first alarm? He must have been suffocated in his sleep! The brother whom she had rejoiced in as the pride of her life was being burnt to death before their eyes, whilst they had been busy dragging out their chairs and tables!

"Oh, Heaven!" she cried, raising her hands imploringly to the wintry sky; and then she rushed forward as the faithful groom had done, reckless of danger for herself.

Lighted splinters fell over her head and singed her hair; the heat of the flames blistered the skin of her face; the edge of her dress caught fire from a broken end of a burning beam.

"What are you doing? Are you mad?" asked Colonel Fane, in stern surprise, as he seized her by the shoulder.

She pointed to the burning, blackened front.

"Gerald—save him!"

"Good Heaven!" and the Guardsman turned pale. "I thought he was away. Here, Mortimer, take her somewhere out of sight," as she dropped in a heap at his feet.

The Rector, who had hurried up at the first news of the disaster, took her in his arms and placed her by her mother's side.

Lady Fane knew nothing of her son's danger, and only asked after her husband.

"I'll send him to you if I can, and the best thing you can do is to drive down to the Rectory. At any rate that will be taking one pair of horses out of mischief."

He called out to his own man to see if the carriage could be got ready, and, anxious about the fate of his old friend, hurried back to where the engine was playing.

"No man could have lived in that room," said George Evans, the head of the firemen. "If he had escaped being burnt the life must have been choked out of him by the smoke."

The Rector shuddered.

Colonel Fane came up breathlessly, and laid his hand on Mr. Mortimer's arms.

"She's with him," he said, hoarsely. "I'm sure of it. Oh, Heaven!" his face was convulsed with grief.

"Where are you going?" as he turned away.

"To find them—or die," he added to himself, as he plunged into the house.

John the groom had been before him, and they found him upstairs, lying on the landing just outside what had been Vic's room.

In front of them was nothing but chaos and blackened ruins, the end of the passage having fallen in just beyond the three steps. The door of the blue room had not fallen down, but it was partly loosened from the hinges, and flames were hungrily devouring the edge of it.

"I must look in," said Fane, huskily.

"Impossible. You'd lose your life for nothing."

"Is there no way where he could have got out at the back?"

"For mercy's sake come back, sir," cried the butler, from behind them.

"Here's John a dead man, and you'll be the same."

"I must get there!" cried the Guardsman, excitedly. "I think the floor would bear me if I could reach it."

"For Heaven's sake!" and the Rector laid hold of his arm.

Fane shook it off, and retreated, in order to get purchase for his spring.

Between the spot where they were standing and the one he desired to reach there was a blackened bole, up which the smoke was pouring from the burning woodwork, and red tongues of flame shot up every now and then half-way to the ceiling.

"It's throwing your life away," said the Rector, as he placed himself doggedly before him.

"Out of the way," cried Fane, fiercely, seizing him by the collar, "or I'll do you a damage."

He sprang forward, in spite of their efforts to stop him, and they held their breath. Dimly through the increasing smoke they saw him reach his goal; the tottering door fell down, and there was a burst of flame and smoke, which seemed to envelope him from head to foot. Then to their horror he disappeared into the burning room, and their hearts stood still.

The Rector bent his head and uttered a prayer, knowing that the only help could come from Heaven.

"Hark!" cried Sir Gilbert, who had joined them, raising a trembling hand.

They listened, and above the thumping of their hearts, the roar of the flames, the hissing of the water from the engines, and the cracking of burning wood, they heard a cry.

The tears gushed from the father's eyes.

"It's Gerald. Thank Heaven!"

"Fane, come back!" shouted the Rector, and immediately the guardsman appeared in the flame-lit doorway with despair in his begrimed and haggard face. Another cry, and he lifted his head, then darted out of sight, crying out something in a half-stifled voice that they could not hear.

They could no longer see him where they were, so they got out of the house as quickly as they could, and made their way round by the outhouses at the back in an agony of hope and fear.

Theresa came running round the corner, white and despairing, followed by a number of servants and dependents and one of the engines. She saw them all straining their eyes, with upturned faces watching the roof with eagerness, and, clinging to her father's arm, asked if they had discovered anything?

"Hark!" he said, huskily, "don't you hear a cry?"

She lifted her head and listened breathlessly, then, her face illuminated with joy, ran forward, crying,—

"A ladder! a ladder! They are on the leads outside the old schoolroom window!"

"Where's Douglas?" as half-a-hundred hands were ready to adjust it.

"He's there," said Sir Gilbert, in an awed voice. "He went to save Gerald and Miss Digby."

"Vic was there? Oh, Heaven help them!" and with a sob she joined her hands together.

Mr. Mortimer was the first to climb the ladder, in a breathless silence, whilst many lips moved in silent prayer. He pulled the ladder after him, rested it in the gutter, and by its means climbed to the top of a pointed gable. Then he took off his hat and waved it in the air, whilst from down below rose a shout of joy, for they knew that the young master was saved.

There he was, caught in a trap between the points of three gables, and

with him was the girl who had saved him, and the man who had nearly died for them both!

CHAPTER VII.

"How she must have loved him!" were the first words that greeted Vic's ears, as she opened her eyes in the drawing-room of the Rectory.

The tears were pouring down Theresa's cheeks as she spoke, and her mother was standing by her side trembling from head to foot.

"Dear girl, she deserves to have him; but I'm glad to say she likes Douglas best."

Vic kept quite still, with closed eyes, her thoughts busy with the events of that awful night. She had dressed herself with anything but overdue haste, and thrown a fur cloak round her to keep out the cold.

Then she had gathered together the things that she was fondest of, and filled her pockets with all that she could cram into them; but on opening her door she had turned deathly pale, for the smoke was coming in columns from the passage by the blue room; and going as near to it as she dared, she could see that the door was closed. Perhaps Theresa had not heard her cry—perhaps Gerald was sleeping there, unconscious of his danger.

She still stood hesitating, wondering if there would be time to run downstairs and send one of the men to look after him. Then casting aside her scruples, as a jet of flame appeared, she ran down the steps, along the passage, feeling the floor hot under her feet, and rapped at his door. There was no answer; she threw it open, and burst into the room, looking eagerly round her.

Dead tired he had fallen across his bed, face downwards, fully dressed as he had come from Aldershot, whilst the candle that he had brought up with him had melted through the great heat and spread all over the silver candlestick.

He opened his eyes wonderingly, as the small hands took him by the shoulder, and shook him violently. Then he sprang up and thanked her for troubling herself, as if his life were of no account. And when they got outside the door, and he saw that the steps had fallen in, and they were out off from the rest of the house, such a light came into his eyes, and he had caught her to his heart, and carried her in his strong arms through the choking smoke.

When they were in comparative safety, with the bleak wind blowing in their faces, and the cold grey sky above, he took his coat off and wrapped it round her in spite of her remonstrances, and she felt perfectly happy in spite of the cold, and all the wretchedness, because she knew that she had saved his precious life.

The time had not seemed very long to her before they caught sight of a face at one of the charred window-frames, which quickly disappeared; and Gerald, going to see if there was anyone in want of help, dragged out what seemed to be the lifeless body of his cousin.

He lay on the leads at her feet, and moved by common compassion she knelt down and raised the heavy head on her knee, and cried because she thought he was dead. Would not any girl who was not quite heartless have done the same?

Yet Gerald's manner changed to her at once, and his eyes looked stern and grave, and he seemed to think of nothing but calling for help.

Presently her thoughts became all tangled, and she fell asleep on the Rector's sofa.

The bright winter sunshine was pouring into the room when she woke, and found Theresa again standing by her side.

As she opened her eyes Miss Fane clasped her in her arms and blessed and thanked her in broken accents for saving her brother's life. Then she took her upstairs to the bedroom which had been placed at her disposal, where she made a hasty toilette, and arranged her dishevelled hair.

"There is some one downstairs very anxious to see you," said Theresa, with a smile which hurt her blistered face. "I wanted him to keep in bed, but he said that he could not rest until he had spoken one word to you."

Who could she mean but Gerald? With a heart beating double quick time, and a pink flush on her cheeks, Vic went into the library, and Theresa, having shown her in, closed the door behind her, and retired. Vic herself looked meeker far than usual, for all the curl had gone out of her hair, and some of it hung in a smooth fringe over her forehead, whilst the rest was gathered into a simple knot at the back. There were dark circles under her eyes that were not due to the shadow thrown by her jet black lashes, and a delicious tremble hung about her pretty lips.

Someone was lying on the sofa, who picked himself up in a tremendous hurry, and before she knew who it was clasped both her hands in his.

"Darling!" was all he said, breathlessly, as his glowing eyes devoured her; but the voice was Colonel Fane's, not Gerald's, and in bitter disappointment she tried to snatch her hands away.

"Aren't you satisfied yet?" he went on fast and eager. "Can a man do more than risk his life for yours?"

"It was for Gerald—Captain Fane," and she hung her head.

"It was for you, Vic! Can't you love me now?" Even as he spoke he tottered back, and a deadly faintness came over him.

"You are ill," she said, anxious to turn away his attention from the subject in hand, and in real concern for his health as well. "You ought to be in bed."

He shook his head.

"Answer me."

"Why ask me now? I am too tired to think," putting her hand to her forehead as if her head ached.

"Because I must. Theresa tells me that you would never have tried to save Gerald if you had not loved him!" studying her face intently.

"Did she tell you that?" with troubled eyes, half raised to his.

"Is it true?"

"No," leaning on the back of a chair, as if for support. "I would have done the same for—"

"For me?" with suppressed eagerness.

"For you, or any one."

"They all think it; even Mortimer tortured me, saying I must be blind."

She sank down on the chair, feeling as if a sudden weight had crushed her. Did Gerald think the same?

"Dearest, give them the lie at once; promise to be my wife!" He knelt down by her, his arm stole round her shrinking waist, and drew her nearer, till her face was close against his chest. Then he stooped his handsome head, his eyes all radiant with joy, and pressed his lips passionately to hers. "Mine—mine till death!"

At that moment Gerald Fane came up to the window, with the glad step of a man who comes forward to meet a joy. Seeing what he saw before his eyes he turned on his heel abruptly, and walked away. The cup of happiness had been raised to the lips of two people, when five minutes' delay flung it emptied on the ground; and little Vic knew as she raised her eyes all that she might have had, and all that she had lost.

"Kiss me, darling!" said the man by her side, raising the small face gently with reverent hands. "Let me feel that the love is not all on my side."

Her cheeks were white as death, and she struggled to be free. "I must go to Lady Fane."

"They will not grudge us five minutes more for our joy," and he held her fast.

When at last she escaped she met Lady Fane, looking tired and worn, at the drawing-room door. Her face brightened considerably when her nephew, with a whole summer of joy in his face, told her that he had won the wish of his heart.

She put her arms round Vic's neck, and pressed her to her bosom with a warmth that told the depth of her relief, and feeling that, our little heroine said to herself,—

"At least I have done my duty by sparing him trouble, and not bringing disunion into his home!"

Theresa looked somewhat surprised, but very glad, and Sir Gilbert, when he came in, nearly shook her hand off.

The Rev. Brian Mortimer, short, with a pale, intellectual face, made them all welcome to stay as long as they liked; and it was settled that, for the present, at least, the ladies should remain where they were.

All the guests, including Lady Maude, had taken themselves off by an early train, and Gerald stayed away the whole day seeing to the pulling down of brickwork that was still unsafe, the carting away of rubbish, the housing of the furniture, the replacement of pictures, mirrors, &c., before they were irretrievably damaged.

Colonel Fane, not yet recovered from the effects of half-asphyxiation, was sent to bed by the peremptory orders of the doctor, and the others being tired out did not sit up long after dinner.

The Rector shut himself up in the library to think over his Sunday sermon, and Sir Gilbert and his son were at the Grange, so Vic was left to herself. She sat by the fire in the drawing-room, tired and pale, and doleful, and no one could have looked less like a happy bride. But she told herself, in so many words, that she was not going to be miserable, that it was a wonder that she could not even muster a smile.

Colonel Fane was so handsome, so charming and agreeable, she ought to be thankful to Fate for having thrown him across her path. Never had she seen anyone to be compared to the fascinating Guardsman during all the years she had lived in her Devonshire home; and how proud she would be to show him off to Charlie and the dear old people at home—yet a tear rolled down her cheek and her lip quivered.

The door opened quietly, and Gerald came in with a small paper in his hand. He looked worn out and fagged, and came up to the fire-place with a slow, dejected step—very unlike his usual firm, elastic tread. He had not an idea that any one was in the room, and started violently when he became aware of the small figure in the arm chair.

At first she thought he was going straight out of the door without speaking to her; but he checked himself, if that had been his impulse, and stood still, looking down at her with stern eyes.

She could not speak, but sat with clasped hands and fluttering heart.

"Do you know that you have no right to give yourself away? Treasure-trove belongs to the man who finds it, unless the Queen puts in a claim," and he laughed joylessly.

She played with her watch chain nervously, trying hard to steady her voice.

"There are some things which a man does not wish to keep."

"Yes, and one of them is a heart that is given to another," he said, gravely. "Make your mind easy, I wouldn't have it at any price. Do you know where my mother is? I've found a paper by the oldest chance which will make her cry for joy. Good-night."

He held out his hand, and tremblingly she put hers into it.

"I hope Douglas will take good care of his little vixen. Child, what are you doing?" his voice changing. "No tears, or I shall have to wipe them away."

"I'm not crying; it's nothing," and she dashed them from her eyes.

Then he dropped her hand gently, and went slowly out of the room with the paper clasped tight in his fingers.

The next day Captain Charles Digby made his appearance, having seen the account of the fire in the newspaper, charmed every one by his straightforward, pleasant manner and good-looking face, and carried off his sister.

CHAPTER VIII.

LADY DE REDMORE was one of the leaders of London society. The *entrée* to her house in Belgrave-square was ardently desired by all who belonged to the fashionable world; and those who were happy enough to get it looked down as from a pinnacle on the others who were forced to sigh outside the doors.

The Hon. Lionel Digby, a tall, soldierly-looking man, with a white moustache and a bald head, had been ousted from his favourite place in the doorway by a crowd of pale-faced young men in the stiffest of collars, who seemed to have expended all their energies in attaining that position, and had none left for joining in the waltz which was being played divinely by the band. He listened to their conversation with good-natured contempt till an old friend touched him on the arm, and congratulated him on being the father of the belle of the season.

He put his finger to his lips with a pleased smile.

"Don't tell it in Gath, or we shall have her picture in all the photograph shops, and that would send me mad. One comfort, if there is any chance of the professional beauty dodge, she will soon have a husband to look after her, and keep the fools away."

Just a yard off from him "the fools" were talking of the same thing in a different strain, criticising the points of Miss Digby's pretty figure, as if she had been a thoroughbred just entered for a "great event."

"Handicapped by Fane, I doubt if she will be able to keep up the pace," remarked Lord Smallbrains, twirling the end of his infinitesimal moustaches.

"I'll bet you any money that she kicks over the traces before the year is out. Did you see how she laughed just now when the fellow frowned?" and the Duke of Featherstone went as near a laugh as he ever allowed himself to.

"There's some romantic story about this burning rather more than his fingers in saving her life, when her home was burnt down."

"No, no, she saved another man; and the romance isn't ended—only just begun."

"Didn't Fane get into a scrape when quartered at Windsor?"

"Yes, a regular howler. By-the-bye, I should like to know what became of little Jenny," and the Duke sighed, sentimentally.

"She's out of your reach, my dear boy. I know for a fact that she's dead—and a very convenient fact it is for Fane. Let us go and chaff him."

They moved off, and others immediately supplied their place, as if it were a point of honour to guard the doorway. Charlie Digby, with Theresa Fane on his arm, protested that it was impossible to get out of the room, and led her away into the conservatory at the end of the back drawing-room. There they remained a long while as it seemed to Vic, who was watching them with jealous eyes, in spite of the circle of young men with whom she was surrounded.

Charlie was the apple of her eye, and she was not at all disposed to give him up to any one else. She did not look much like a broken-hearted girl, as she sat on a sofa in a lovely dress of white tulle, spangled with crystal, her cheeks flushed with a delicate pink, her eyes sparkling, her lips smiling, as she answered her admirers with one witty remark after another.

Colonel Fane edged his way through the crowd. "You might dance this with me, Vic!" bending low with that air of proprietorship which always angered her.

"I might, but I'm not going to."

"Supposing I say you shall?" with an angry gleam in his eyes.

"Supposing you do, it won't make any difference," she added, calmly, as she unfurled an enormous fan. "Please go away, I'm enjoying myself thoroughly. Ah!" a smothered exclamation, which caused the Guardaman to look up quickly. He saw that Captain Fane had just come into the room, his fair head towering above all those who were near him.

Instinct told the lover that in that calm, proud face lay the only danger for his peace of mind, and, with a man's usual want of tact, he said, in a growl whisper, "Remember, I stand no flirtation in that quarter."

Not waiting to see the effect of his remark he sauntered away, and soon was chatting pleasantly with a widow, whose devoted slave he had been for a year and a-half.

Vic's delicate nostrils quivered, and she pressed her pretty lips together, that was all; but anyone who had studied her face would have known that these outward signs meant an inward tempest.

She certainly had not intended to dance with Gerald till Colonel Fane's unwise prohibition roused her natural perversity; but now she looked up at him with such an inviting smile that he broke all his resolutions and joined the group about her.

"You are not dancing?" It was a platitude, but it did not strike her as insane, coming from him.

"No, my last partner danced a most excruciating step, and I'm afraid to try it again."

He instantly remembered, as of course she meant him to, that their steps went divinely together in the drawing-room at the Grange.

He hesitated, met her eye, the blood rushed to his face. "We used to get on pretty well. Will you give me another chance?"

She got up from the sofa, a smile of tremulous happiness on her lips, and never heard the eager remonstrances of the other men whom she had just refused.

It was playing with edged tools, but that has been woman's favourite amusement since the world began, and the sense that it was forbidden added a dangerous thrill to the delight. Her foolish heart seemed as if it would bound from her breast, and her feet went round as if in a dream.

Oh, if this waltz would last for ever, or that life would finish with its end! It was a mad and a wicked wish, but Vic that night was scarcely responsible for her actions.

Gerald felt the blood on fire in his veins, but he kept himself well in hand, and betrayed nothing.

The talked but very little, and what they said was often a simple commonplace phrase, which yet was remembered and treasured up, as if it had been the words of a sage.

Captain Digby passed them by and never saw them, because his whole attention was given to his partner. Theresa was looking very well, and the blisters had left no mark on her sweet, serious face.

"Those two are always together," said Gerald, with a short laugh.

"Yes, pity he's a Digby."

"That could make no difference now."

"What do you mean?" looking up into his face for the first time in her astonishment.

His eyes fell, his face grew grave. "Didn't Douglas tell you? I thought he would."

"No, what is it?" shaking with sudden agitation.

"Only that your uncle's name is cleared. We thought he had brought shame upon our mother's sister, and on the night of the fire the marriage certificate tumbled out of an old cabinet which was broken to pieces. What's the matter?"

Too late! It came upon her so maddeningly now, just a week before her marriage. If she had only waited but a single day Gerald would have told her that evening when he came in and found her alone. Her brain seemed to go round in a whirl, and she dropped like a broken flower at his feet.

In a moment he had lifted her up and carried her through the open window on to the balcony. He placed her on a chair, and knelt beside her, supporting her drooping head on his shoulder. They were alone "under the stars." His breath came fast, his heart went out to her, his poor little Vixen, on a wave of tenderness that nearly broke down all barriers; but he loved his honour even more than this little girl, and the kiss which hovered on his lips was never given.

The curtain of the window was pulled quickly aside, and Colonel Fane stepped out on to the balcony.

"Where is Vic?" he asked, fiercely. "What have you done to her?"

"The room was too hot for her, and she fainted."

"I never knew her do such a thing before," looking at him suspiciously.

"Here, let me come there. It's my place, not yours!"

Reluctantly acknowledging his cousin's superior right Gerald got up, though it was a moment of supreme bitterness for him. It was he who had found her in the snow—surely she ought to belong to him rather than to any other.

Douglas Fane stooped and kissed the pale lips passionately. Gerald turned away, saying he would see after Mr. Lionel Digby and the carriage. His face was stern as death as he passed through the ball-room, looking neither to right nor left.

"Confound that fellow!" exclaimed a choleric old gentleman with white hair and black eyebrows, "I wish he wouldn't mistake my feet for a doormat!"

"Six feet-two on one's favourite corn, eh, Sir Timothy?" and Lord Smallbrains smiled.

"Yes; no joke at all, and I should like to tell him so. He was dancing just now with a little girl I met in the snow. Do you know her name?"

"Miss Digby. She's going to put the noose on Douglas Fane next week."

"Douglas Fane of the Guards?"

"The very man. He's past praying for."

"Humph!" looking thoughtful. "Is he a widower?"

"No; never had a wife," and the Viscount moved away.

CHAPTER IX.

"I NEVER knew anyone so much changed as Victoria ever since that unlucky journey in the snow," sighed Mrs. Digby, as she held the newspaper in her hand, and looked over its folds at her son. "Nothing would content her but we must leave the Court, which she always loved better than any other place in the world. A season in London, she said, she must have; and now that is here she seems quite mad about gaiety. As to a quiet evening with her father and myself she can't stand it."

"She's in love, and that accounts for everything," observed her brother, philosophically.

"Now that this breach is healed between the two families I wish she had chosen his cousin. I like his face so much better than the other's."

"Half the women in London are in love with Douglas Fane."

"That won't make it pleasant for Victoria," said Mrs. Digby, sensibly. She had an aristocratic face with a delicate profile, and a peculiarly sweet smile, which she had transmitted to both her children. Now she wore a troubled look, for Vic's fainting fit of the night before had alarmed her un-

reasonably. Other people saw nothing to be frightened at, but the mother knew that Vic had never done such a thing before in her life, and she felt there was some mystery behind.

"No money has been spared on her trousseau, and the dresses are something too lovely. I am sure when I was a girl they would have made me perfectly happy, and the child doesn't care to look at them!"

"So much the better. What a comfort it is to think there is one woman in the world with a soul above finery! Where is the little paragon?"

"In the study. Don't go in; he's there."

"What a nuisance the fellow's becoming. I wanted to take Vic to the Park."

Instead of going to the Park Miss Digby was seated very much at her ease in a lounging chair, attired in a frock of pale primrose, which set off her dainty dark head and flashing black eyes to perfection.

Colonel Fane was leaning against the mantelpiece, his back to the fireless grate, his face to his beloved.

He looked strangely harassed and careworn, as if his pleasure-loving soul had not had what our friends over the water call "a good time" of it lately.

"You flirted disgracefully last night; you know you did."

"I flirted! Of course, I always do; but disgracefully is going too far, and I won't allow you to say it."

"I forbade you to dance with Gerald, and directly I turned my back you did it."

"Excuse me, it was under your very nose, only you were talking so hard to a woman with painted eyebrows that you never saw us."

"Nonsense; I couldn't see you anywhere, and when I found you at last you were in his arms."

"Because I had fainted, and didn't know a man's arm from the arm of a chair. But, anyhow, it was very bad taste on your part to disturb us."

"Bad taste!" he laughed, bitterly. "I wonder when you would let me come near you if you had your way."

She looked at him from under her long lashes with a pleasing sense of power. He was getting angry, and the more his passion rose the handsomer he looked. But he was pale to day, and seemed as if he had some care on his mind; and, after all, her heart was the reverse of stone, and it was not his fault that she did not love him better.

"To anyone else I should have said 'not at home.' You ought to be grateful."

"Would you have said so to my cousin?" with something like a sneer.

She sprang from her chair like a wounded tigress, her eyes flashing, her breast heaving.

"Say that again, and I'll never speak to you!"

"Forgive me; I'm nearly bothered out of my life," passing his hand over his forehead. "It was only in joke."

"I hate such jokes," her lips trembling. "They are horrid, and perfectly detestable."

"Don't be angry with me, Vic," putting his arm round her. "Listen. I am up to my ears in debt. Do you think I ought to give you up?"

It was a chance. She saw freedom before her eyes, and turned her back on it resolutely. No, she could not let it be said that she broke her faith for the sake of filthy lucre. There was a slight tremble about her lips, but she answered at once,—

"No, I have heaps of money. What does it matter?"

He kissed her rapturously. Conscience had prompted him, he had obeyed it, and won. His heart bounded with joy; but the more he loved, the more he feared.

"They will try to turn you from me, but you won't let them do it? You won't, will you, darling?"

"Why should they try?" lifting her serious eyes to his. "You are not an escaped convict, taking advantage of a ticket-of-leave?"

"No, I'm not a convict," smiling down at her, fondly.

"And you haven't got half-a-dozen dead wives in a cupboard, like Blue Beard?"

"You silly child!" pinching her cheeks, which had lost their bloom.

"Nor even one live one hidden away in a corner?"

"No, little one. I'm not a saint, but I'm no scoundrel; and whatever I've been in the past I'll be a good husband to you, so help me Heaven!"

She had an awe-struck look in her eyes, and the smile vanished from her lips.

"It is an awful thing to be tied for life."

"Not awful when people are suited to each other."

"Fancy if we bore each other!"

"But that we never shall," confidently. "You are the only girl I ever met with whom I could think of passing a lifetime without a shudder."

"By-the-bye, you were to see my presents to-day," moving a little away from him. "Lady Fane's diamond brooch and Theresa's earrings are lovely."

"Glad to hear it. What has Gerald given you? Something original, I bet."

She turned away her face that he might not see the scorching blush that covered it.

"Nothing." She tried to say it carelessly, but the word stuck in her throat.

"Nothing!" in blank amazement. "Well, that's original, certainly, but I suppose it's coming."

"Yes, of course," with a strong accent of doubt.

"Well, I must go." He parted from her with more reluctance than ever, and his last kiss seemed as if it would never end.

He looked back with wistful, longing eyes at the small figure almost lost in the depths of the lounging-chair. Selfish man as he was, it was all the world to him just then.

Vic drew a deep breath as soon as he was gone. With a queer little smile hanging round her mouth she muttered to herself,—

"Certainly, for a vixen, I'm getting wonderfully tame. Oh! if my wedding-day were only my funeral, how happy should I be, to be sure!"

The front bell was constantly ringing, to betoken the arrival of present after present; but, instead of showing any pleasure in them, she scarcely seemed to care to undo a single package.

"Vic is dreadfully changed," sighed her mother once again.

But in the evening, when they had some guests to dinner, she was the merriest of the party, and with all her former eagerness made engagements for the next day.

"Child, you will tire yourself out," said Mrs. Digby, warningly; but the warning was unheeded.

Sometimes at the opera Vic looked down on Gerald's fair head in the stalls, but he never made his way to their box, or managed to be at hand, to put them in the carriage. He was often in the Park, and often in a crowded ball-room; but in either place he made the crowd an excuse for avoiding her. It was better so, she knew, but if he had never guessed the secret in her heart, why should he be so terribly unkind? The thought filled her with a vague unrest.

"Vic, you have something on your mind? Tell it me," said Mrs. Digby, as she pushed back the girl's dark curls, and kissed her white forehead.

Vic immediately wriggled away from under her mother's eyes.

"Marriage is a solemn thing," she said, with a weary smile, "and I can't be always laughing."

"Quite right, dear; I only want you to be happy. Wasn't Douglas to have come to dinner to-night?"

"I don't know."

"It is rather odd that we haven't seen him since Saturday."

"No doubt he has a lot of things to look after," and she turned away. "There's a knock; I daresay it's he."

But the butler informed his mistress the next time he came into the room that it was only a gentleman, Sir Timothy Galton by name, who had called to ask if they would favour him with Colonel Fane's private address, as he could not find him either at the Club or the Wellington Barracks.

"It must have been very important. What did you say, Barton?"

"Why, you see, ma'am, I thought it would be more prudent to say we didn't know it. Gentlemen don't always wish their addresses to be known."

"I think there was no reason for such caution," said Vic, haughtily; but she went off to bed with a weight on her mind which scared the sleep from her eye-lids.

She had a presentiment that there was something wrong. Two whole days without seeing Colonel Fane, when he had made a point of haunting Recluse-square both in the morning and afternoon, and generally in the evening as well!

"He has gone off to America," said Lady Charlotte Digby, with a confident nod. "I always thought he looked dangerous, and Vic has had a lucky escape."

"Gone off! I only wish he had," growled her brother, who could not bear the idea of missing his little girl's bright face from the Court. "No chance of it—the fellow's madly in love."

CHAPTER X.

WHERE was Colonel Fane? Seated in the brilliantly lighted room of the Army and Navy, giving a farewell dinner to his cheerful, insouciant bachelorhood, in company with his favourite brother officers; or closeted with his lawyer in the privacy of his own comfortable lodgings, signing marriage settlements, and all kinds of long-worded deeds? Neither one nor the other.

He was in his lodgings, and another man was with him; but the man was not a lawyer, and his presence seemed to his host neither a pleasure nor a necessity.

"I tell you, sir, Jenny Forest, or Jenny Fane, as I believe she has every right to call herself, is alive; and if you try to marry Miss Digby the day after to-morrow I'll have you arrested for bigamy!" and Sir Timothy Galton drew his dark eyebrows over his eyes in the fiercest of frowns, whilst he leant on his stick in an uncompromising manner.

"Somebody is deceiving you," said Colonel Fane, coldly.

The matter was of such vital interest to him at the moment that he did not think it necessary to notice the idle threat, but deep down in his heart he swore that nothing and nobody should come between him and his own little Vic.

"They would not try that sort of game with me," said the Baronet, with a short laugh. "I have known this poor girl ever since she was a squalling baby, worrying my bailiff, who was an honest, hard-working man, out of his senses. I recognized her the moment I saw her leaning on the gate, looking as if anyone could have knocked her over with a feather. I tell you, my heart bled for her," thumping the table with his fist, "and I mean to see justice done here, so sure as my name is Galton."

"You need not excite yourself," with stern gravity. "If my poor wife is still alive I shall be the first to own her. It was she cast me off, and I have nothing to reproach myself with."

"We won't inquire into that," pursing up his lips; "but if your promise to own her is not an empty boast this is the moment to prove it. My carriage is at the door, and I'll take you at once to Hammersmith."

Douglas Fane passed his hand over his forehead as if half-distracted. Jenny alive! The old man said it so coolly, when her life meant to her husband the loss of everything which made existence worth having.

It was impossible to put a check on the Baronet's tongue, and to go on as if nothing had happened. He could not go through the farce of another marriage even if he could stifle conscience, and reconcile himself to the idea of such villainy, because the accuser would stand close behind his back, and the knot would be severed as soon as made.

As these thoughts passed rapidly through his mind he saw that there was no escape. The Baronet's stern eyes fixed upon him raised a feeling of opposition in his breast.

"There is no hurry," he said, slowly.

"No hurry! Man alive! What are you made of?" his eyes blazing with fierce indignation. "One poor girl is dying for a sight of you, and another is waiting for her affianced husband, and you say there is no hurry! I tell you that you have no choice but to decide the matter at once. Perhaps you mean to kill your wife by this neglect?" darting a keen glance at him across the table.

"If I did it would be no business of yours," said Fane, bitterly; "but show me where she is, and I will see if you are not deceiving yourself as well as me."

Sir Timothy silently preceded him down the staircase, and motioned him to take his seat beside him in the mail-coach.

There was not a word spoken between them as they drove rapidly through the lamp-lit street. Douglas sat as in a dream, with his arms folded, his head sunk on his chest, till they stopped at the door of a small cottage, with cabbages and sunflowers in the front garden.

"Behave as a man of honour," said Sir Timothy, "and I won't say a word; but attempt to cheat either of them, and, by George, I'll have you kicked out of the Guards!"

Colonel Fane, who looked white and haggard in the moonlight, drew himself up, and said, sullenly,—

"You presume on your grey hairs!" and walking slowly up the path lifted the latch of the small green door, and went in.

There was little furniture in the room—a low bed with a coloured counterpane ran along the opposite wall, one or two wooden chairs, a table with a shiny cover, on which there were medicine bottles and some unwashed crockery, a dirty, carpetless floor, a smouldering fire in the unblackened grate. The Guardsman's glance took in all these details with callous indifference before it fell on the face which rested on the tumbled pillow, then he shuddered.

"Be you the husband of this poor deserted creature?" asked a woman, who had apparently been performing the functions of a nurse to a limited extent.

He pointed to the door.

"You can go."

"I ain't loikely to stay, bless yer heart, if I've a chance o' going," tying a blue handkerchief over her untidy head; "but mind yer give her the mixture every two hours. Will you see to that?" giving him a sharp look.

"Yes, yes!" taking up the bottles gingerly. "Is she to have a sleeping-draught?"

"No, doctor said not. Good-bye my precious!" bending down over the bed. "This fine gentleman's going to take care of you; but I doubt if he will do it as well as Sally. If she's took any worse, just run round the corner to No. 3, and I'll come in a jiffy!" then with a surly nod, she went out, and shut the door behind her, and Colonel Fane was left alone with his deserted wife.

An expression of unspeakable disgust was on his face, but it softened as he went slowly up to the bed, and looked down on the girl whom he had stolen from her happy home by Windsor Forest. She was blooming then as the roses in June, and he had loved her with a wild, fierce passion strong as death, whilst it lasted. Pure as the daisies which grew on her father's lawn, in order to win her he had to wed; but possession soon took the charm off the prize, and he tired of her before the year was out. Stung to madness by his indifference she ran away from him, and left a note behind her to say that she had drowned herself; but when she reached the river her heart failed her, the cold dark water looked forbidding, and life seemed precious because nearly lost. She fainted on the bank, and a Quaker passing by took pity on her, and led her to his house. The next morning she had intended to leave him; but was attacked by a nervous fever, which took away her strength. For a long time she remained hidden under his hospitable roof, but his daughter grew jealous of her, and insisted upon her being sent away. From that day to this she has supported herself by her needle, too proud to appeal to the father who had disowned her, or to the husband who thought she was dead. Now she was dying, and she knew that the end could not be far off.

A thousand thoughts passed through Colonel Fane's mind as he looked down on the thin, pinched cheeks and haggard face, which had once been as fair as the summer.

"Is it you?" and her large blue eyes fixed themselves upon him with an expression of satisfied longing.

"Yes, Jenny. It is not my fault, remember, that you have come to this."

"Don't aoid me, I shan't be here long," covering his hand with kisses. "Good Heaven! I'm not a savage," he broke forth, his heart full of rage and pity. "I'll take you from this wretched hole, and give you a decent home."

She shook her head.

"No use; by the end of the week I shall be gone."

By the end of the week, and his own wedding was fixed for the next morning but one! Involuntarily it dashed across him that it would be better for both if she died that night.

"Don't you want to live?" he said, hoarsely.

"No. Between us we've made a terrible mess of it. I've been as wretched as I could be. What should I care to live for?" Then a spasm of pain passed over her wasted face, and she pressed her hand to her chest.

"Not if I tried to make you happy!" his better self struggling with his worst.

"Could you love me as you did when you got me to come away with you? No, no"—moving her head in bitter unrest on the pillow—"I want to die, and nobody shall keep me here." Then she turned her face to the wall, as if even his voice had lost the power to charm her.

He sank down on a chair, and buried his face in his hands. Could he be the same man who felt so idiotically happy on Saturday because of a small dark head resting in seeming love and confidence on his shoulder? Now it was sin to give her one loving thought—sin to long, as he *must* long, for the sound of her voice—the light of her eyes. That girl lying there, panting out her feeble breath, was a greater barrier than thousands of miles of sea or land. What was space when love could traverse it? What was an obstacle if love could overcome it?

"Oh, let me die!" murmured the voice of Jenny.

Ay, let her die to-night, and he would be free—free to go straight from her deathbed to the altar, and no one would have the legal right to stop him.

"Oh! Vic! Vic! I can't give you up. I swear I can't," he groaned, and was answered by a moan from his unhappy wife.

It startled him from his dreams of lost delight. He stood up and looked down at her again with anxious eyes, that took in every sign of decay with avidity. Her chest was heaving with the difficulty of drawing a breath; her eyes were sunken like those of an old, withered woman; even the hair which he used to fondle on account of its beauty had lost its brightness, and the once pretty lips seemed to have lost their curves, and to be drawn by suffering.

"Give me my medicine," she said, irritably, with the impatience of long weakness and pain.

He took a bottle and held it before her weary eyes—"This?"

"No, the other."

The other was the sleeping draught. He uttered a feeble protest, remembering that it was forbidden; but she persisted, adding in a querulous whisper,—

"Have you only come back to plague me?"

The bottle was marked in divisions. He poured out the contents down to the first mark—his hand trembled, a cold sweat broke out on his forehead; it was for her good as much as his—there was nothing but misery before them if her life were prolonged; she was longing to die, and death for the weary creature meant release.

Down to the third mark he emptied the bottle; then, with shaking fingers that nearly dropped it, held the glass to her fevered lips. She drank it thirstily, gave him a smile of thanks; then her head sank back, and she fell asleep.

He turned away from her, and dropping down on a chair leant his elbows on the table, his head on his hands. What had he done? His brain seemed dazed. Jenny—his long lost Jenny—he once was so fond of, and now she was dead—dead like some old woman weary of life. He had only given her the medicine she had asked for; he had done his duty, and told her that she ought not to have it. His hand had shaken, and she had gone to sleep. No one could say a word against him, not even that worrying old man, Sir Timothy Galton, who had ferreted out his secret, because he was so interested in his tenant's child, and brought him against his will to the bedside of his wife.

And now he could go back to his sweet little Vic, and draw her to his arms once more, and put his lips to hers, and feel that no one could take her from him—no one, not even Gerald, who had given her up for a scruple.

The small room was lighted by one tallow candle, the neglected snuff grown long dimmed the little light there was, and the draught from the open window cast odd shadows on the wall.

The room was perfectly quiet, and not a single sound broke the silence of the summer night; suddenly, soft, and solemn, and clear, the church clock struck twelve. To the husband watching by that bed of death it seemed like the knell of a departing soul. A great horror seized upon him, a cold shiver crept up his backbone, a cold sweat broke out on his forehead.

His sin stood out before him like a spectre—a ghastly, haunting spectre—from which there was no escape. His teeth chattered, his hair stood on end; he shook both chair and table by convulsive shudderings. Murder! murder! murder! seemed written by gory fingers on the wall. He hid his face upon his hands, but he could not hide from himself. The mark of Cain was on his forehead, and he was branded for life.

Every man or woman would shrink from him if they only knew; he would be a thing apart, with a barrier for ever between him and the rest of mankind, a great gulf fixed between himself—his guilty self—and all the friends and brother-officers who had helped to make life pleasant. And Vic, pure as the angels and happy as a butterfly, would be for ever on the other side.

With his soiled fingers he would never dare to touch her—never dare to face the questioning look in her frank, bright eyes. He had lost her—by the desperate means that he had used to win her—he had lost her. Not only was he a blood-stained criminal, but a fool.

He clenched his hand, and struck his forehead in impotent wrath and remorse. Jenny, dying fast of consumption, was an obstacle which nature herself would have removed. Jenny died, and by her husband's hand, was an obstacle large and monstrous as the Pyramids.

Hour passed after hour, the candle flickered and died, the cold grey light of morning poured in through the unshuttered window. It seemed to stare at him like the inquisitive eye of an acquaintance.

Every object in that narrow room became distinct. On a peg behind the door hung a straw bonnet and a faded shawl, covered with the dust which showed how long it was since they had been worn. In the corner there was a washing-stand with commonest of crockery, a water-bottle and a broken tumbler. On the chimney-piece, between a china pug and a glaring green vase, there was an exquisite little statue of Parian marble, which carried him back at one bound to the days when he wandered with the daughter of the old Baronet's bailiff amongst the budding hawthorns, with the songs of the birds in their ears.

A tear came to his eye. Jenny was all in all to him then—and now! He shuddered, gave one look askance at the bed, and started up.

"If I stay here I shall go mad," he muttered; and, catching up his hat, walked quickly to the door and threw it open.

The glory of the summer morning shone full upon his haggard face, and made him shrink as if the sun were the eye of his Maker. He pulled his hat over his brows, shut the door behind him, and passing by the homely ebbages with their diamonds of dew, opened the little gate and went into the road.

For a minute he stood stock still, then hurried away as if fleeing from the horror which would not be left behind. It was with him when he went through his duties at Wellington Barracks. Murder! murder! murder! seemed to be ringing in his ears as he stood before the men of his troop with a white, stern face, and put them through their drill. He looked round the yard, and saw that everything was the same as usual, he alone was changed.

"If this goes on I shall go mad," he thought to himself again, as he made his way to his own quarters, startled by every footstep that came near him. What would Vic be thinking of him? The next day was his wedding-day, and he had not seen her since Saturday. He must see her, if it was for the last time.

An hour or two later he got into a hansom, and drove to Eccleston-square. He did not notice that Barton looked at him inquiringly, but walked on straight to the library.

Vic in her primrose-gown was seated by the writing-table, inditing one of her numerous letters of thanks. She put down her pen, and looked round with laughing reproach, which showed how little his absence had really mattered to her.

"So here you are at last! We were just going to advertise for a missing Guardsman."

"I've been ill," he said, gravely, passing his hand over his forehead. The sight of her, in all her beauty and sweetness, was too much for him; it seemed to daze still further his bewildered senses.

"Ill? I'm so sorry," her eyes softening. "Charlie would have been round to look after you if we had only known."

He was dressed just the same as usual, in irreproachable taste, but he looked strange to her; and though she did not care at all about it—in fact, she hated it—it was odd that he hadn't tried to kiss her.

"What have you been doing with yourself?" she asked presently, as she toyed with a paper-knife.

He shivered, and walking hastily to the window asked if he might shut it.

"Certainly, if you are cold. Charlie says it's suffocating."

"Leave that letter, and come and talk to me."

She wiped her pen, and rose obediently, feeling that he was in no mood to be teased. He drew her down on to the sofa beside him, and after a moment's hesitation took her hand. Still he could not meet her eyes, but kept his own fixed on her dress. That horrid word was sounding louder and louder in his ears, till he almost thought she must hear it as well, and half-expected to see her start away from him in horror. If this were going on for ever life would be a perfect pandemonium, and he was better out of it. She told him in her sweet, soft voice how they had been to this place and that, and seen So-and-so, but he scarcely heard her. Suddenly she became conscious that he was not listening, and stopped abruptly.

"What is the matter with you?" she asked quickly.

A quiver came over his face, and his black moustaches twitched. He gripped her hand so tight that it was positive pain. "Vic, you love Gerald better than me"—all the colour forsook her face, and she began to shake.

"You want me out of the way, don't you?"

"How can you say so?" she gasped, with white lips; "you've no right!"

"No right?" He laid his hand upon her curls, and she felt it tremble. "Listen, child. I have loved you better than anything in earth or heaven—better than my life, better than my soul. Don't let them talk you out of it. If I have done anything wrong it was for you. Oh! darling, darling!" His voice broke; he caught her to him, and kissed her lips again and again with hottest passion, as if it had been a last good-bye.

"Douglas, what is it?" she cried, half frightened; "do you want to be free?"

"I'd die first!" and he kissed her hair. "If I don't turn up to-morrow you will know that I've gone to kingdom come," with the ghost of a smile.

"Are you going?" in surprise, as he got up.

"Yes," with averted eyes. "Tell Mrs. Digby I can't dine here to night."

"Ah! She thought, perhaps, you would be giving a dinner to your bachelor friends?"

"My bachelor friends!" he repeated mechanically; then he went to the door. His face was ghastly, and he knew it; so without another look at the face he loved so madly he walked out of the room, and let himself out at the street door. "Good-bye," he said hoarsely when he had got to the doorstep, though there was no one to hear.

CHAPTER XI.

"DOUGLAS not coming to night! How very strange!" exclaimed Mrs. Digby, later in the day. "People will think it so odd."

"But it isn't odd. Most men give a bachelor dinner on the day before—a sort of farewell to single independence," said Vic, as if she had studied the subject well.

"Child, I wish you would not look so white," with a wistful look into the small, listless face, which used to be so bright and eager.

"Better than being like a peony. By-the-bye, I shall keep upstairs to-night. I won't be stared at as if I were a show."

"Dear me, the dinner will be quite a farce without bride or bridegroom," said Mrs. Digby, looking really distressed. "I do think these Fanees are the most extraordinary people under the sun. Captain Fane has just sent an excuse."

"I knew he would," murmured Vic.

Her mother's quick ears caught the words. "You knew he would?"

"Yes. I offended him once long ago, and he has never forgiven me." He called me a vixen, and I flew into a rage."

"Quite right, too. The young men of the present day think they can say whatever they like."

Vic was silent, but whilst she was playing with the tassel of the window-blind she said to herself,—

"I'd give anything to hear him call me vixen again."

"I am sorry you refused to spend your honeymoon at the Grange. They say that the wing has been rebuilt and looks as well as ever."

"I wouldn't go there for anything!"

"But why not? I thought you were fond of it?"

"I am going to Paris; we don't want to be buried alive," she answered, evasively.

Her mother heaved a sigh, and hurried away, having a thousand things to see after, and Vic was not left one moment to herself. Lord Smallbrains was to be best man, and the Duke of Featherston had been specially engaged to see him safely through his duties. In fact some of them he would have gladly taken upon himself, having an eye to the pretty face of Lady Sibel Digby, the bride's first cousin, and one of the bridesmaids. Charlie Digby said that if Theresa Fane was head bridesmaid or no he was going to take her under his special charge, and the best man might look after Lady Maude, who was of higher rank; so the arrangements had to be left to chance, and the ruling powers hoped that the *convenances* would be respected.

There was a large dinner party, principally composed of relations; and Vic, seated upstairs in a pleasant room that used to be her schoolroom, listened to the roll of the carriages, thankful to think that no one would invade her privacy.

At last she could take off her mask, and be as miserable as she liked, without dreading the unspoken questioning of her mother's kind eyes, or the frank remonstrances of her brother. She sat down in a low chair, her hands clasped in her favourite attitude behind her head.

The bustle and excitement of preparation were all over, the last dress had been tried on; and the bridal attire, in all its splendour of cream-coloured satin and Brussels lace, lay spread out for public inspection on the bed in the next room. There was nothing more to be done till she was led out to execution on the morrow; and for the first time for many long weeks she had plenty of leisure to think, when thought meant semi-madness.

By her own folly she had ruined her life; but she would confess it to no one but herself. The man who was about to marry her should never suffer for it. She would be a dutiful wife to him, and all should go smoothly, but with happiness and joy left on the doorstep of her home. Yes, she would try to be good and do her duty; but at eighteen, when the heart is young, it is sad to say good-bye to love—the elixir of life.

It might have been so different—there was the sting. If it had not been for the pride which egged her on she would not have been the pledged wife of Douglas Fane when the name of Digby was cleared from its stain. But where was the use of thinking of it, and bemoaning it? The milk was spilt—and the pitcher empty. Yes, empty, like her wilful heart, for ever and for ever.

The room was growing dusk, but the servants had forgotten to bring a lamp. She did not want a light to cry by, so she did without. Suddenly there was a step on the stair, which made her heart flutter wildly, a knock at the door—it opened, and a tall form came quickly into the room! She could not speak for astonishment, as Gerald Fane knelt down by her side, and took her trembling hand in his.

"Vic, I've come to ask you something."

The light from a lamp outside fell full on the fair, frank face, and she saw there was a radiant smile on his lips. "Will you have me instead of Douglas? Could you love me as well?"

Deathly white, she tried to draw away her hands. "Are you mad?" she gasped.

"Nearly mad for joy. Listen to me. Douglas gives you up—he *must*. There is no help for it. He says if you care for me—marry me to-morrow instead of him. And you do, Vic, I swear it."

He looked into her eyes. And *his* seemed to light the room, his face came nearer, and his golden moustaches trembled with eagerness. She drew back frightened, whilst her heart thumped deafeningly,—

"I—I don't understand."

"He was a married man—but don't be too hard on him. He kept away as soon as he heard she was alive, and now he gives you up."

"A married man!" her eyes opening in horror and disgust. "Why did he deceive me?"

"He was deceived himself. Never mind the details; he gives you to me, and surely that's enough;" and as the longing in his face grew and grew he suddenly threw his arms about her, and drew her small head close to his. "You were mine from the beginning, my treasure-trove. You must love me, and you shall!" Then he put his eager lips to hers, and one heart seemed to melt into the other.

The time of doubt and estrangement was over, each barrier had been swept away, "and she was his" "and he was hers" for ever and aye. For an hour of intense happiness they sat side by side on the sofa, their hearts too full for much speech, whilst desire was lost in fruition; and then there was a rustling of silks and satins, and Mrs. Digby came sailing into the room.

"Captain Fane, I've only just been informed that you were here. You ought to have been shown into the drawing-room."

"So I was, but I escaped. I've come to ask your daughter to be my wife, and she has consented," he said, proudly.

"Is this true?" looking from one to the other, and literally gasping for breath.

"Yes, mother, dear," and Vic threw herself on her mother's neck.

The Hon. Lionel Digby was sent for at once, as well as his son, and the guests were left to entertain each other with vague surmises. Lady Charlotte Digby announced, in an undertone, to her next-door neighbour that she was sure the Colonel had hanged himself, whilst the Fanes exchanged anxious glances. Presently Sir Gilbert was fetched, and the wonder increased.

"I should like to see the Colonel himself," said Mr. Digby, stiffly.

"He sent you this note, which perhaps will satisfy you," and Gerald put an envelope into his hand.

Mr. Digby read it through. "Yes, this is quite sufficient. Is it true, Victoria, that you engaged yourself to Colonel Fane when you liked his cousin better?"

Vic hung her head. "Yes, father."

"Humph! a most extraordinary circumstance, when there was no compulsion. Come to us after a decent interval," turning to Gerald, "and we will talk the matter over."

The lovers looked blank; even Mrs. Digby seemed taken aback.

"But, sir, just consider, this is the only way to avoid a fuss," urged Gerald, trying to look at the arrangement from a practical point of view, whilst his pulses were beating madly. "Our names being the same, many people will think they made a mistake from the beginning, and I think I could get a special license in time. Tell them the wedding will be at four instead of twelve. Give me the addresses, and I will send the telegrams."

"Stop a bit, young man. How about the settlements?" half carried away by his impetuosity.

"Come into the library, and in half-an-hour I'll satisfy you."

"But nothing could be signed nor a single deed drawn up."

"I'm afraid," with a slight smile, and drawing himself up, "I must ask you to trust to my honour."

"That I'll go bail for," said Charlie, readily, only too glad to exchange one cousin for the other.

Colonel Fane was seated alone in his lodgings in Albemarle-street, with a pile of papers before him and a pistol by his side, hidden under the folds of a coat. He looked ten years older than when he stood at Lady de Redmore's watching with uneasy eyes the flirtations of his coquettish fiancée.

Handsome he must always be, because of his regular features, but the light had gone from his eyes, and his expression was hard and defiant.

If he had sinned more than other men he had suffered as much as any during the last twenty-four hours, and he had come to the end of his endurance. He could not live with the spectre of his crime following his footsteps, like the black dog which haunts the movements of a man in *delirium tremens*.

He could have no joy in the society of his pure and innocent victim with its awful secret buried in his heart. He looked back to the few brief weeks of his courtship. The girl's wealth had been the magnet which had drawn him to her side, which had determined him to cut out his cousin.

Gerald was not steeped in debt as he was, therefore the marriage would be of no mercenary value to him; and as to sentiment, he did not believe in that, and one girl if passable to look at was just as good as another.

Then love stole into his heart, and he knew that for him there was only one girl in the world. He laughed at himself for being love-sick as a school-boy; but he was led on in spite of himself by a certain sweet unconventionality which gave a charm to words and looks, and the smile that came and went like April sunshine, till his passion rose like fire in his veins, and he felt that he would rather die than give her up.

And now he had given her up, and he knew that he must die—die, stained with the sin of Cain, flying from earth to that other, "where the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched."

He buried his face in his hands with a convulsive shudder. In spite of all

that had happened life seemed to grow sweeter as he was about to give it up. Ashamed of his own weakness he raised his ghastly face, and stretched out his arm towards the pistol.

Memory went back over the events of that endless, most miserable of days. He was in the library at Eccleston-square, and his betrothed was sitting by his side watching him with an innocent wonder in her eyes.

She was as unconscious of the fierce struggle going on within his breast as a child playing on the edge of a flower-crowned precipice.

Even his warning words, "If I don't turn up to-morrow you will know that I have gone to kingdom come," which had a dread significance in his own ears, had fallen unheeded on hers. She had only taken them as a positive assurance that he would be there without fail.

Poor little girl! In all her bright young life she had known no evil, and it was for him who really loved her to bring the first shadow across her path.

She was too tender-hearted not to cry when they brought her the news that her lover was dead; but Gerald would be there to comfort her, and she would not grieve over-much.

At that moment the fiercest hatred rose in his heart against the man who had supplanted him; and yet, in the midst of his secret preparations for his own end, he had found time to send for him, and tell him—actually tell him with his own fevered lips—to go to Eccleston-square, and take the girl who was waiting for him, Douglas Fane, and make her the wife of Gerald.

Surly a generous action like that would count against a million of vices! The sternest moralist must allow that it was worthy of a saint—though done by a sinner—a murderer. Shudderingly the ghastly word passed through his mind like an awful ghost, bringing despair in its train, and shattering all better thoughts—all aspirations after final and heavenly forgiveness by its loathsome presence.

What a contrast there was between himself and his cousin! Yet their lives began much in the same groove, and his seemed the more prosperous of the two.

The good-looking Guardsman had passed by the young subaltern in a cavalry regiment, and left him behind in the race of life. His handsome face had been a passport to women's favour, ever since the first dawn had appeared on his upper lip.

Featherston had been his rival with the bailiff's daughter, but the girl had found Douglas Fane as irresistible as the rest. Few women had ever turned a deaf ear to words of tenderness from his mocking lips; and Vic, the bright little sunbeam, had given in, though Gerald was first in the field.

And what had it all brought him, or whither had it led? Success with Jenny Forest had led him on through the pain of disillusion, through vexation and disappointment, to the lowest, darkest depths of sin. Success with Vic had taught him that it was hard for a soldier to die with decent courage, if she was to be left behind.

Jenny was dead, her beauty worn away by pain and suffering, her gentle life slain by his hand. He shuddered. To what fate might he have brought the other if Sir Timothy Galton had failed to interfere? He might have lived to see her pretty head bowed in shame, whilst her lips—those lovely lips that he had kissed that day—curled the fate which had brought them together.

Better than that would be death, or a hundred deaths—and a Fane was never a coward. Good-bye to the love that clung like a serpent round his heart. Good-bye to the life that had once been bright with hope and fairest prospects. Good-bye to all that he had known or loved or doubted; he was going to the land of silence, and after a while his very name would be forgotten, and he would be as if he had never been.

With a muttered prayer, he raised the pistol to his breast.

There was a knock at the door; he started violently.

"What do you want?" he said, roughly, because of the tension of his nerves.

"A woman wants to see you, Colonel. She says her business is urgent."

He leant his head on his hand. It was probably the nurse come to tell him that his wife was dead. To send her away might excite suspicion.

"Show her in."

The servant retired, and presently Sarah Benson stood before him, dressed in a decent shepherd's plaid shawl, and black straw bonnet. He felt as if he could not meet her eye, but asked her hoarsely what she wanted.

"I made so bold as to come," her tone respectful and subdued. "The poor thing's been asking for you that pitifully it would go nigh to break your heart."

An electric thrill shot through heart and brain, and he stared at her with wide-open eyes.

"She—she's alive?" he stammered.

"Ay, she's alive, and getting on famous, though 'twasn't the medicine as did it," her large, good-humoured lips relaxing into a smile, "for as I see directly I comes into the room you gived her nothing but a drop of water I had filled up an empty bottle with."

"Thank Heaven!" A choking feeling came in his throat; the room whirled round, and overcome by the feeling of blessed relief, Douglas Fane slid down from his chair on to the carpet.

CHAPTER XII.

CAPTAIN GERALD FANE was the happiest and the busiest of men in London. He was in Lincoln's Inn before his lawyer had appeared in his chambers, and he nearly drove the elderly gentleman out of his wits by his wish to do three months' work in one morning.

"And now can you send one of your clerks for a special license?"

"No, my dear sir, that is a thing a man must always get for himself. In fact, I am not certain you won't have to wait till to-morrow."

"I'm dashed if I will!"

"That won't hasten the wedding; but drive down to Doctors' Commons, and they will tell you all about it."

Gerald pulled out his watch. "I suppose I must manage it."

"Well, you can't be married without. Another thing you've forgotten, I'd lay a wager. You never asked the lady the size of her finger for the ring!"

"By Jove, no; but I'll ask for the smallest they've got."

"Then she won't be able to get it on at the last moment, and you'll have to borrow another."

"That would be a bad omen."

"As it is, you have one proverb against you—'Marry in haste'—you know the rest."

"Yes, I know it; but I'm not in the least afraid," with shining eyes. "My father has behaved like a trump, and we shan't be beggars."

"And your cousin! Don't you owe him something as well? He seems to be a second Don Quixote," with keen eyes, trying to ferret out a secret.

Gerald was a bad bump, and his face flushed to the roots of his hair. "You see, he knew which way the wind blew," he said, with a short laugh.

Mr. Redfern gave a dry smile, as he put his hands in his pockets. "Sir Timothy Galton has taken a great interest in this marriage. I expect him here in half an hour."

"Then I'll be off."

"You'll have those deeds drawn up as soon as possible; and, remember, the ceremony is for four o'clock."

"I won't forget, and I only hope nothing will occur to prevent it," as he bowed his young client out of the room.

The words sent an ominous chill through Fane's blood, as he jumped into his hansom. Could he bear it with anything like common fortitude if he were cheated out of his happiness at the last moment? After the delicious unexpected joy, after the long hopeless waiting for what he thought was the inevitable, to go back now would be impossible. He thought of the day when the marriage certificate was found, which cleared his aunt's name, and Reginald Digby's as well, and the paper had seemed of no value because it came by half a day too late.

Sometimes he had felt inclined to mistrust Douglas. He had kept things back from Vic which might have made a difference, and he always seemed to want to throw him and Lady Maude Ashton together, as if they were engaged to be married. It might have been from a love of mischief, for Douglas was fond of a joke, but the mischief, whatever it might be, was apt to turn to his own advantage.

Poor fellow! He looked half mad yesterday, and well he might with a wife in Hammer-smith and a bride in Eccleston Square. At first he had almost doubted if his cousin were in his sober senses; but when he was once sure that he was in his right mind he did not care to waste much time in explanations—he was in such a fever to get to Vic and claim her for his own. Now he almost wished that he had not been in such a hurry. Douglas looked so queer; if anything happened to him he would never forgive himself.

As he drove on his fears increased tenfold, and when the license had been seen after, and there seemed to be no further difficulty in the way of his own happiness, the thought of the other in his hopeless misery weighed like lead upon his mind.

With the little golden ring in his pocket, which was to make two people into one, he drove to his cousin's lodgings, impelled by his secret fears. He sprang out of the cab, and gave such a resounding knock as re-echoed down the street. The door was opened, not by Colonel Fane's spruce man servant, but by a girl who had a terrified expression in her eyes.

She recognized Gerald at once, and pressed him to come in and speak to her mistress. The Colonel was out, but she would like to see him if he could spare a few minutes to come upstairs.

Gerald could not spare a moment, but he bounded up the stairs, and found Mrs. Lacy, the landlady, a respectable-looking person, in dark green cashmere, waiting for him at the door of his cousin's sitting-room.

She apologised for troubling him, but she was that uneasy in her mind that she could not keep her anxiety to herself; "for you see, sir," she went on with some agitation, "if anything had happened, and I had kept silence, it might have been turned against me."

"Yes, yes," in a fever of impatience. "I quite understand."

"Well, sir, it was about ten o'clock last night, and I was sitting quietly in my own room, thinking it was near bedtime, when I heard a sudden noise in the Colonel's room, and a woman's scream for help. I ran downstairs with my heart in my mouth, and went into the room without so much as a knock, for when I'm scared I forget my manners; and there he was, lying on the floor in a dead faint, and a woman—a nice, tidy-looking person, who seems to have brought him a message—was a-kneeling by him, trying to get him back to his chair. Lor'! sir, she might as well have tried to lift an elephant, for the two of us together couldn't raise him an inch; but I just loosened his necktie, and sent her to ask two of the other gentlemen to step upstairs. This was partly to get rid of her, for I saw things about that weren't for every eye. There were letters on the table; one to you, sir,"—Gerald started—"one to a lady, and a blue paper with 'my will' in large letters on the outside; but worse than all that," putting her handkerchief to her eyes, "close by where he had been sitting there was a pistol—a pistol, and with both barrels loaded."

"Good Heaven!" said Gerald, in a low voice, as every bit of colour forsook his face. "Where is he now?"

"We don't know; he went off this morning. When he first came to he seemed dazed, but he sent everyone out of the room as quickly as he could, and I could see him dart a look at the table to see if his pistol was safe."

"You didn't leave it there?"

"No, no, sir; I wasn't so foolish as that. I carried it out of the room long before he opened his eyes, and I locked it up safely in my own drawer. I'm not afraid of firearms, and I knew it wouldn't go off unless I made it, and I thought how he wouldn't like to ask for it lest we should make so bold as to ask his intentions. He told the woman that he would look round in the morning, and then he sent us all away. He laughed at the idea of being ill; but he looked so strange and deathly white that it would have been a comfort to my mind if he had seen a doctor. I made a point of looking into the room the first thing this morning, but the letters were not to be seen, and the desk was locked up. Perhaps he has changed his mind, poor gentleman; but yesterday evening I knew he meant to die," beginning to cry again.

"And he went out this morning?" his brows knitted together in deep thought.

"Yes, sir; about eleven o'clock. He had some brandy-and-soda, I believe, but not a bit of anything to eat; and as I met him coming down the stairs he looked old enough to be his own father. I plucked up my courage, and couldn't help saying: 'I am afraid that person brought you bad news last night?' 'Not a bit of it,' and he gave a queer sort of laugh. 'The best I ever heard in my life, only it came a day too late.'"

Gerald drew a deep breath.

"Then we need have no further fears about him. A man who has had good news does not wish to put an end to himself the next morning."

"Ah, but it came too late," refusing to see a scrap of comfort, with the delight that many women of her class have in hugging a sorrow.

"Better late than never," he said, cheerily; then he bade her good morning, and hurried off. As he drove to his tailor's in St. James's-street he wondered whether the good news meant that Douglas Fane's unfortunate wife was dead. If it had come a little earlier it was possible that he might never have betrayed the secret of her existence, and married Victoria Digby at twelve o'clock that morning. Thank Heaven, it was too late; but in the midst of his own joy he thought remorsefully of his cousin.

He had been up all night writing telegrams and letters in readiness to be sent off the first thing in the morning, for the invited guests had to be prepared for the surprise that was awaiting them, as well as to be told of the change in the hour; and a few of his own special friends had to be requested to put in an attendance. Lord Smallbrains was still to be best man, for it was too late to make a change. At five minutes to four Captain Gerald Fane, the happiest of bridegrooms, took his post.

He bore himself bravely, in spite of the hundred speculations which were going on around him; and the only sign of outward interest he showed was when his blue eyes flashed a lightning glance down the aisle from time to time.

"This is the queerest thing I ever knew," whispered Lord Smallbrains to the Duke of Featherston.

"Told you so; only the first chapter of the romance has begun too soon."

"But what's become of our man? When this one yired to me to-day you could have knocked me down with a feather."

"He's played the hero or the fool, and given her up. There's something in the background! but here they come. Look alive, and get to your place."

"Not a bad 'locking one amongst them," eyeing the bridesmaids critically.

"Lady Sib's the prettiest, I bet," said the Duke.

"But 't'other one's got the tie," from the Viscount, who had a respect for Lady Maude in consequence.

The bride was deadly pale, and every now and then cast a half look over her shoulder, as if afraid that her old lover would turn up. Her dress was made as simply as fashion would allow, and had a ruff round the slender neck. The diamonds given her by the Fanes glittered under the folds of her Brussels lace, but they were scarcely as bright as her wondrous dark eyes, when she lifted them for one instant to the face of the man beside her.

Therea and Lady Sibel looked very well in their cream coloured dresses of Surah and lace, with bouquets of crimson roses; but no one looked half as lovely as Vic, with the dew-drops on her long, black lashes, and a sweet tremble on her lips.

There were eight bridesmaids, and an infinite number of grooms-men, rank and fashion being freely represented amongst relations and guests.

The Earl of Thornton, tall and aristocratic, something like his brother, the Hon. Lionel Digby, wore a doubtful expression, whilst Lady Charlotte Digby, in a brilliant bonnet trimmed with yellow feathers, looked at everyone in turn triumphantly, with a glance that said, as plainly as possible, "I told you so."

"For richer for poorer, for better for worse, till death us do part."

The solemn words were said, and Victoria Erayntrede Fane passed down the aisle, and out into the summer sunshine, her hand on her husband's arm.

"Mine at last!" he murmured, as he drew her to him when they were alone in the carriage, and kissed her lips.

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That day he wore in his scarf the gold pin that had fastened her rag when he found her in the snow.

CHAPTER XIII.

It was a happy Christmas that year at the Grange, and the Court was deserted by Mr. and Mrs. Digby and their son. Mr. Mortimer, with his usual kindness, had placed the Rectory at the disposal of Lady Fane; and as the Grange was not quite as big as Windsor Castle some of the guests were accommodated under his roof.

Theresa stood in the hall, with a heap of shining evergreens before her, and a look of despair in her eyes. "How I am ever to manage it I can't imagine!"

"What do you want?" asked Charlie Digby, with interest, as he sauntered out of the billiard-room with his hands in his pockets.

"A ladder, a ball of string, a hammer and nails—and they are all useless without something else."

"What's the something else?" looking down at her in a way that prevented her from looking up, whilst the colour stole into her cheeks.

"A man."

"Here am I, always at your orders," with a low bow.

"But you won't like dirtying your fingers."

"I shall—immensely."

"You said so the other day."

"It wasn't *you* that asked me."

"That makes no difference," bending over a bit of holly which she was trying to break.

"None at all, of course," with fine sarcasm.

"Don't you know," lowering his voice, "that if you asked me to jump into a coal-hole I should do it—and gladly, too?"

Theresa was rude enough not to answer this question, except by the deepest of blushes.

"Is there anyone in here?" asked Vic, peeping into the billiard-room, writing-case in hand.

"Nobody but me," answered her husband from the top of a pair of steps, from which point of vantage he was disarranging a shelf of *Bible's Magazine*. "Charmed to see you, but this isn't the best of places for writing a letter."

"It's the only place I've got. The Duke and Sibel have taken possession of the breakfast-room, Lord Smallbrains and Lady Maude are in the library, Theresa and Charlie in the hall, and it's no use attempting it in the drawing-room."

"A case of general spoons," with a smile of amusement as he

descended from his elevated post, and dragged a small table and a comfortable chair towards the fire for his wife's benefit. "Vic, there's something I wanted to ask you. Should you mind meeting Douglas?"

"Not the least bit. I should like to show how grateful I am to him," stroking his cheek with her pen.

"Humph! That's not what your father feels. His wife is dead, and I'm awfully sorry for him, so I should like to ask him."

"Do, by all means, Gerald," laying her face against his coat; "there's something I want to ask you."

"Say on, little one," putting his sunburnt hand upon her head.

"Were you ever engaged to Lady Maude?"

He started in surprise. "Never; who put that into your head?"

"Douglas," in a low voice.

"The deuce he did!" His face grew serious.

"Vic, I never meant to marry anyone but you, and if you wouldn't have me no other girl would have had the chance. You believe me?"

"Of course I do," with a bright smile of unfailing trust.

The next day was Christmas Eve, and all the school-children came up to the house to enjoy themselves. The happiest of them all was Vic, as he led the game of hide-and-seek, and thought of the one at "Blindman's buff" last year, when her heart was so heavy and her steps so light. All the clouds had rolled away since then, and she felt as if her life for the future would be one hymn of praise.

"Don't run about too much, or you won't be able to dance this evening," said the happy husband, watching his little wife with delighted eyes.

"I think I shall be able to dance as long as you will ask me," she said, with a merry glance, as she subsided into the depths of a housemaid's cupboard. The search for her was long, and little feet went pattering about the halls and passages disturbing *tête-à-têtes*, and scattering sentiment with the sounds of boisterous merriment. When they found her at last amongst the dust-pans and brooms their delight was great, and they trooped into tea with appetites whetted by pleasure.

The Duke of Featherston sank down on a chair, and fanned himself with a dinner-napkin, after unlimited exertions in handing about buns and bread-and-butter. "This sort of thing doesn't pay."

"No," said Lady Sibel, gently. "It wouldn't be so nice if it did."

"I should have been paid, at all events, if you had sat down and let me wait on you."

"I would much rather you waited on these poor little children," with a smile.

"Then I am paid after all," and the *tête-à-tête* was prolonged.

"I think I might just as well call you Theresa," said Charlie Digby, as he held a plate of buns in front of him, to show how busy he was. "You know we are almost brother and sister."

"It would be nice to have another brother," musingly.

"It would be nice to have a sister, but ten times nicer to have a wife," lowering his voice. "Theresa, won't you be mine?"

There was silence in that corner, but hands met hands, and the buns crashed down on the floor.

"Colonel Fane coming!" exclaimed Mrs. Digby. "I don't know how I shall greet him!"

"Don't greet him at all," said the Earl. "I mean to give him the cold shoulder."

A small hand was laid on his arm.

"Don't, please, for my sake."

"It is exactly for your sake I mean to treat him as he deserves. Add to everything else he was up to his eyes in debt, and your money was to pay them."

"What does that matter?" Then in a soft voice, her eyes shining, "he gave me Gerald."

"And that's just what I don't understand. However, if it will please you, I'll shake hands."

"Thanks, dear uncle," and she went upstairs to dress for dinner, with a weight off her mind.

Of course, woman like, she tried to make herself look as nice as she could, and then hurried downstairs to have the first meeting over without a number of eyes to look on.

It was with some difficulty that Douglas Fane had braced his nerves for this interview; but he told himself that he could not put off the dreaded moment for ever, and go through life without speaking to his cousin's wife. He would meet her and her husband constantly in society, for they frequented the same places, and had the same friends; that is to say, unless he meant to lead the desolate life of an anchorite, which was scarcely suited to his taste.

Jenny had died on Vic's wedding-day, and her husband had tasted the bitterness of baulked desire as he stood by her deathbed. She had lived just long enough to rob him of that on which his heart was set, and died too soon for him to be able to atone for the miserable past. He had blighted her existence, because he had rushed wildly into wedlock without considering the consequences of such an ill-assorted union, and he had spoilt two lives because in the eagerness of his passion he would not be denied. After her death he fell dangerously ill, and hovered for a long time with a wandering brain on the bank of the cold, dark river from which there is no return; but Heaven was kinder to him than he seemed to deserve, and after weeks of wild unrest he had a refreshing slumber, and woke once more to the life that was awaiting him.

The Digbys had kept his secret, and no one suspected that he had once had a wife. Many wondered when the gay young Guardaman would at last be caught; but there was one who had determined that he should not long escape. During his illness she had driven to his door every day of the week with anxious inquiries, hothouse flowers and hothouse fruits; and when in the autumn he came to tend her his thanks, his handsome face looking worn and wan, her heart had gone out to him in a wave of irrepresible tenderness. The tears gushed from her eyes, and she called him Douglas for the first time. He went away softened. It was something to think that there was one person who still cared for him after the "mucker" he had made of life. He was tired of everything that had gone before, and this would be a new beginning.

Weary and utterly reckless, he made his offer, and was accepted, Lady

Manners, the fast, slightly widow, with whom he had flirted at odd times for more than a year, consented to put aside her figurative woe, and bestow on her admirer six thousand a-year, with her masses of golden hair and her painted eyebrows thrown in gratis.

He was flattered and tolerably content, till this sudden invitation to the Grange upset his balance. The thought of seeing Vic once again set his blood in a fever, and his own eagerness warned him that he ought to stay away.

But Douglas Fane had rarely resisted temptation in the eight-and-twenty years of his life, and he thought it was too late to begin. His betrothed was much annoyed at his passing Christmas anywhere but by her side, though he told her, as he kissed her, that he was going from a sense of duty simply to patch up a family quarrel.

As he drove from the train, and saw the lighted windows of the Grange, plainly testifying to the hearty welcome within, there was anything but peace or goodwill in his wild, untutored heart.

He was going to see the girl that he had loved—ay, and still loved—as the wife of another, and how would she meet him? How would he be able to greet her with the calmness of ordinary friendship, when every pulse in his body was beating with fever-heat, and his passions had never been under proper control? Yet he must check himself now, if never before, for the sake of Vic, and for the sake of his honor.

Vic's heart beat fast as she laid her hand on the handle of the library-door, but as she hesitated it was thrown open, and a voice she remembered well, exclaimed,—

"I knew it was you. Oh, Vic, have you forgiven me?"

He took her hands in his and, shutting the door behind them, led her forward into the firelight, his eye wandering from the pretty upturned face to the slight rounded figure in its dainty white dress.

"Have you forgiven me?"

"Yes; I feel as if I had nothing to forgive," trying to draw her hands away, and half frightened by his earnest eyes.

"Then you are happy with Gerald?"

"Yes, he is so good to me."

"Good! Who wouldn't be?" with a short laugh.

His face was lined and haggard, his hair was streaked with grey, and he looked as if at least a decade of years had passed over his head.

"I should like you to be happy, too," she said, pitifully, out of the compass in her heart.

"Am I not? I am going to be married to a widow with a potful of money. You remember her perhaps at Lady de Redmore's?"

"Not that woman with the painted eyebrows?"

"Why not? What does paint matter on the face so long as there is tin in the pocket?" and he laughed again.

She was silent, trying to hide her disgust.

His face changed.

"Vic, I could never love any woman but you, so what does it matter? She will take care of me, and see that I don't go to the deuce faster than I need."

Then Lady Fane came in, and Mrs. Digby and her husband Gerald followed, and whilst the Christmas bells were ringing outside they made peace with the man who had brought sunshine after sorrow into the dear old Grange.

"You were mine from the first," said Gerald, his arm round his wife's waist. "Nobody but the Queen could dispute the possession of my own sweet treasure trove."

[THE END.]

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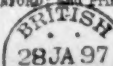
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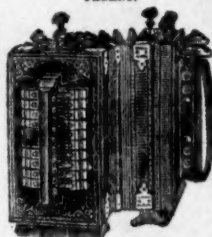
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